

An Englishman in Bonaire

~ Sean Paton ~

By Sammy Ensing

The documentaries

A short environmental documentary filmed on Bonaire begins: "A young boy sits on a Bonairean beach at sunset, holds up a piece of coral and asks environmentalist Sean Paton, 'Is this valuable?' 'No,' says Sean, 'it is just coral.' He sighs and continues, 'Sadly coral does not have the same value as gemstones, such as diamonds or emeralds, but it is equally as precious or even more so. Bonaire values its coral but the slow cancer of tourism is leaving its mark.'"

Shots of Bonaire's underwater world play as Sean continues: "One diver can do damage for more than a thousand years. If our shoreline was truly covered in gemstones there would be a battery of battleships out there of the shore and as many policemen as we can throw at any one beach. Perhaps then we would really understand the value of our coral and the value of our future. Perhaps we would not sell it for 25 dollars to divers that have no idea what damage they do when they break their little piece off to take it home, stroke the little fish or generally disturb the environment to say they have been there."

A picture of a diver handling a porcupine fish and other divers stepping on the coral reef bring home his point as he says: "It is tragic that a diver feels he has to leave a mark. Coral is Bonaire's natural resource. If we lose our coral, we lose our future. And if we lose our diving industry we lose a great deal of our economy. Surely if it was gemstones we had down there we would protect them. Then why on earth can't we protect our reef?"

The short documentary ends with Sean pointing at the boy who is sitting on the beach and stating: "What's the solution? The solution is not new by-laws, not regulation but education! Educate yourself, educate your friends. Dive on the coral. Enjoy it, watch the beauty. Don't touch it! Don't break it! Don't take it home with you! So what is the value of coral? Far greater than any gemstone, than any diamond. It is precious. It is his future!"

I thought the documentary touching, inspiring and strong-willed. A bit like its creator, Sean Paton, an Englishman in Bonaire, who has travelled the Caribbean extensively and lived on St. Maarten for years, and is now known as a controversial advocate of Bonaire's nature and environment. He is controversial mainly because of his strong focus. He talks about the environment and says it like it is.

Sean has made many short documentaries on environmental issues so far; the dumping of waste water by the scientology church cruise ship called *The Freewinds* that used to visit Bonaire very regularly (the recent discovery of asbestos has the cruise ship grounded for now), excavation of coral stones along Bonaire's coast resulting in destruction of the natural seawall and the



A sweet moment captured by camera during the interview: Sean at home in Bonaire playing with his dog in the garden.

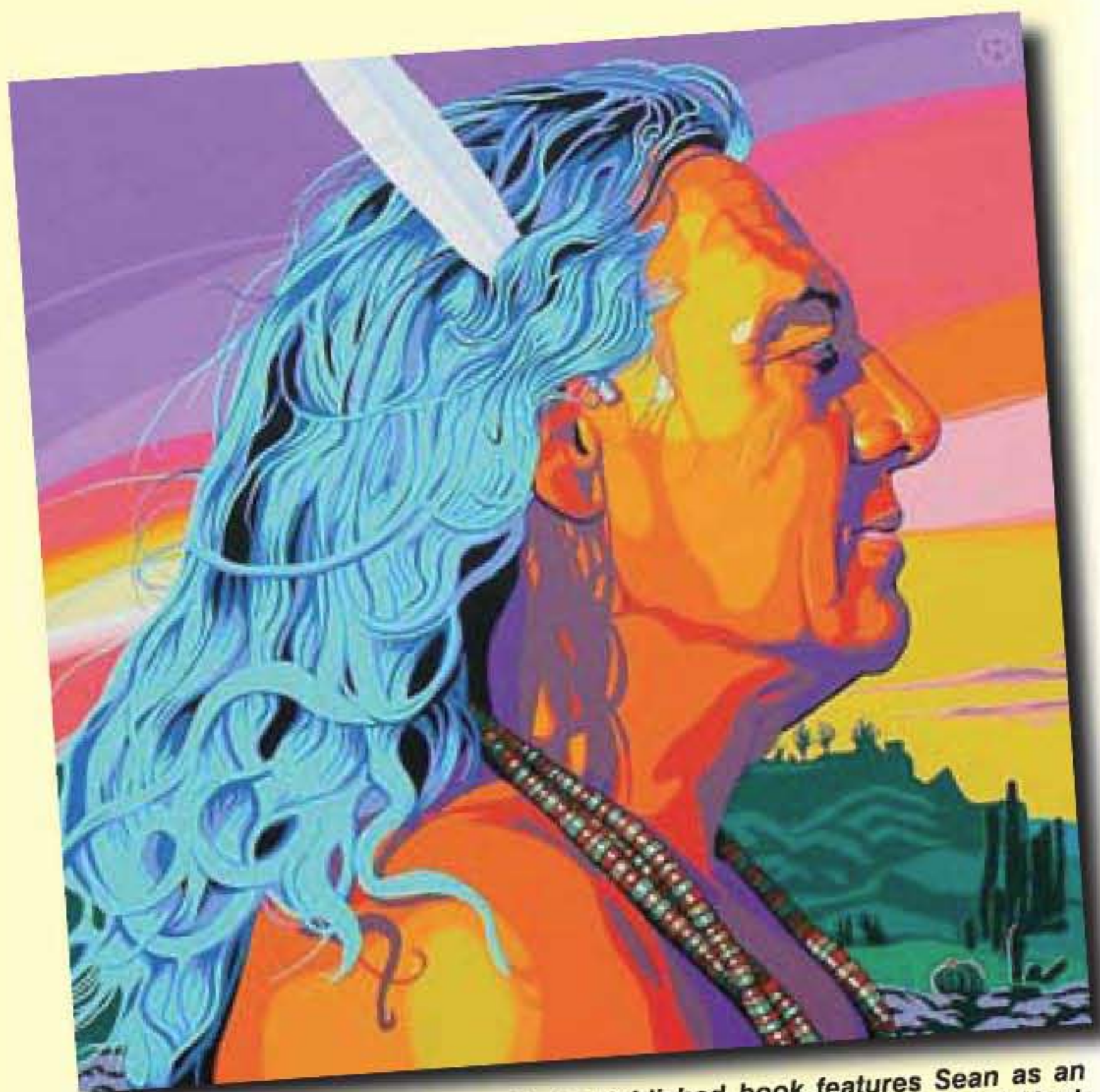
scarring of the landscape, the implementation of a high tariff for bringing household trash to the landfill and consequently resulting in garbage along the sides of the road and in the kunuku (Bonaire's wild landscapes) and interviews with various individuals, a marine biologist working on the island, the head of the Bonairean division of Stinapa, and some local politicians (the ones that can be reached for comments). These films and many others can be played on the Website

www.forumantilles.com.

Forum Antilles

"My goal is to offer untamed listening and to educate people," the smiling, twinkle-eyed environmentalist says. "I was involved with environmental issues all my life but at one point I ran away from it. When I came to Bonaire, however, I could not run anymore, I did not want to run anymore! I was wondering, however, what the chances are that you can still change something. In this case I hope it is still early enough in the cycle that you can turn it into a positive cycle though I did not quite realise what an uphill struggle it would be. I thought you just stand up and everyone will go 'oh yeah, right!' Of course, it did not work like that in practice."

So Sean created a Website to share local, regional and



The cover of Sean Paton's soon-to-be published book features Sean as an Indian chief, a painting created by well-known Bonairean icon painter Henk Roozendaal.

International organisations such as Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd are hosted on the pages too.

The Website was followed by a radio show. Sean: "Forum Antilles as Webpage combined with radio has stronger pulpit. I could not get people to see what was going on. I got on the radio because I love radio and I love music and it is a great medium. He is silent for a moment, looks away from me and then says: "My brother was blind so radio was always very important to him. I lived on a boat for most of my life and then it is your only form of contact. I like radio much more than television because it does not make people numb. Radio lets you walk around and you have to really work hard to keep people's attention on the radio and I kind of like that challenge. That is why I started on the radio. He then turns back to me and smiles as he tells me: "I ended up buying the whole Sunday out for Forum Antilles, the radio program. You can listen to it on St. Maarten on stream."

Lone Wolf

"When I look at people like Jadira Veen of St. Maarten Pride Foundation and the Nature Foundation in St. Maarten and all those people, I realise that they are all to some extent struggling

and losing battle," Sean says, and continues: "Money and the contract is always a step ahead." He tells me that he prefers working alone: "I kept away from working in and with environmental groups like the Nature Foundation and Stinapa because they always become ineffective. All of a sudden you have got 12 people in the room with 'oh we mustn't say that' and 'oh we can't do this.' I kept Forum Antilles as me not because I am egotistic (*laughs and says 'maybe a little bit'*) but I only have myself to answer to. If I had been part of a foundation I am sure none of those films would have been made. I am not a member of Greenpeace or Sea Shepard or Stinapa, but there is an unspoken loyalty to people working in the same fields."

Writing a book

Currently Sean is ready to publish book one of a series of four. It is a book that incorporates a lot of the environmental issues on Bonaire that he points out in his films. Sean: "It is a mixture of facts, what is going on right now, with fiction and imagination. It has a lot of me in it; it is slightly spiritual and very environmental." The book features a fictitious character called White Arrow, an Indian, living on a Bonaire of days past and this character

enables Sean to weave in and out of that past. So why write a book when you want to make a point, when film is more today's medium? He smiles and tells me: "It came out of frustration, of not being able to get the story out, in real terms. Most people that see films like the ones I direct will actually turn away and maybe come back to it, but most of the time they didn't even watch the film because a little piece of mind says it is not acceptable. They just tell me "oh good film." The book is like a safety valve in a way. I thought how can I get the story out and really make it both interesting and distant enough that people do not shut themselves off from it? So that's what made me write it. I pour it into a novel so they won't put the book down."

Sean laughs and tells me that the idea of him sitting on Bonaire doing what he is doing now would never have occurred to him twelve years ago when he was living on St. Maarten. He then becomes serious and says: "Because the problem up there is so big. I mean, who looks at waste water up there, nobody!"

Maybe we should...