Dominique Forget

"At first glance, Asia may seem a long way from Canada, but when we look more closely, we find that there are a great many similarities between these two parts of the world." This is how Dominic Morissette, a professional photographer specializing in documentaries, sums up his experience over the last three years. Since 1998, he has been scouring the coastal areas of Canada, India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, together with his partner Catherine Pappas. Always on the lookout for new material, the two photographers have captured the way of life of fisherfolk and their communities, and immortalized it on film.

"The idea came to us when we were in India," explains Morissette. "We found ourselves in a community of fishermen who kept asking us questions about what fishing life was like in Canada. We really had no response to give them. Then and there, we decided to explore this subject more deeply."

**Ethnological portrait**

The pair started their work in India. They photographed fishers, their families, and their way of life. "We wanted to produce an ethnological portrait of India's coastal region," he recalls. Subsequently, they took the fruits of their labour to Nova Scotia. "We showed a stack of our Indian photographs to Nova Scotia fishermen, as a way of breaking the ice. Soon they were inviting us to go fishing with them. We were able to get some really fine photos."

At that point, Morissette and Pappas decided to pursue the project further and make an exhaustive study. They dreamed, among other things, of returning to India to show Indian fishers the photos they had taken in Canada, and to answer at last the questions that they had left unanswered some months earlier.

**South Asia Partnership**

To obtain financial support, they approached the Canadian Council of Professional Fish Harvesters and South Asia Partnership (SAP), two organizations active in defending the interests of fishers while promoting exchanges between the northern and southern hemispheres. Both agreed to help
fund the photography project. On the suggestion of SAP, the artists then turned to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which also lent its support, and is still a key partner for the two photographers.

Since then, Morissette and Pappas have been pursuing their dream. In 1999, they toured Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick, exhibiting their photos of Indian fishers in every seashore community they visited. At the same time, they took every opportunity to photograph Canadian fishers, their customs, and their way of life. Then, from September to November, they traveled throughout India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. To break the ice, they first showed the pictures taken in Canada. Then they resumed their work, photographing local fishing communities and adding new pictures to their collection.

**Canadian tour**

Today, the images they produced have been shown all over Canada. During the year 2000, they toured British Colombia, Manitoba, Quebec, and the Atlantic provinces with their photos, and hundreds of people — fishing experts and the simply curious — have admired and praised their efforts.

"We hear the same comments everywhere," says Morissette. "The first thing people notice are the differences between eastern and western coastal communities. Their dress is different, for example. But very quickly, visitors start to see the similarities. Fishermen here face the same problems as those in Asia — shortage of fish stocks, overfishing, or difficulties in organizing and defending their interests." Recognizing such similarities is a first step in understanding that it is possible — and perhaps essential — for people around the world to address and overcome common problems together, by pooling their knowledge, experiences, and resourcefulness.

**Future plans**

As for the future, the two have no intention of putting away their cameras. "We would love to go back to India and take pictures in different seasons of the year. For example, we would like to show how coastal people get through the winter, when there is no fishing," says Morissette. They also hope to publish a book of photographs. "In our exhibitions, we show perhaps thirty pictures. With a book we could show much more. I think this would help to shed new light on fishermen and the problems they face."

*Dominique Forget is a writer based in Montréal.*

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**For more information:**

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