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Sebastian Copeland: "Protocols are imperative when filming in sub-zero to remove as many variables as possible [...] if you don't capitalize on opportunities, they generally don't occur again." Sebastian at the North Pole. (click to enlarge)
Image by Keith Heger, courtesy Sebastian Copeland

ExWeb Interview with Sebastian Copeland, "filming goes on top of the demanding physical requirements"

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Posted: Jul 29, 2010 05:20 pm EDT
Sebastian holds, with partner Eric McNair-Landry, the world record for the longest distance travelled in a twenty four hour period with kites on skis. He documents his extreme expeditions on film and tells ExWeb about caring for cameras and filming in sub-zero temperatures, what damage sastrugi can do to food packaging and about frustrating long hours in the tent without enough books to read.

Himalaya PDA Ultralight Package 0.9 kg (2 lb.)



"I was on skis from the age of three and have been an avid windsurfer for over thirty years. The combination of those skills had me get the basics in twenty minutes." (click to enlarge)
courtesy Sebastian Copeland

When kiting on Greenland bring a couple of books, he said to ExplorersWeb's Correne Coetzer. "Conditions vary wildly. When the wind pulls a no show - you sit and wait for it. Sometimes for a day or two. It's good to bring something to read! I read two books and could have used a third."

Currently Sebastian is in Europe taking a holiday with his family, spending a lot of time sailing and windsurfing. "I have a race boat. It's fun to be back on the water! It has been a long and busy year with finishing the editing and promoting my film "Into The Cold" about the centennial expedition I led to the North Pole last year with my partner Keith Heger. I haven't taken any time off since training for that trip last year."



ExplorersWeb: Before you went kite skiing on Greenland, what was your kiting experience?

Sebastian: My experience kite skiing was limited to two training trips! One in Montana for a week last January, and ten days in Iqaluit in April.



"Kiting is incredibly easy when everything is going well. It can go terribly wrong very quickly. It took a couple of crashes to accelerate the learning curve!" (click to enlarge)
Image by Sebastian Copeland

I did not find the basic mechanics of kite skiing challenging. I won land kiting events when I was a teenager, and the handling is the same. I was on skis from the age of three and have been an avid windsurfer for over thirty years. The combination of those skills had me get the basics in twenty minutes.

That said, kiting is incredibly easy when everything is going well. It can go terribly wrong very quickly. It took a couple of crashes to accelerate the learning curve!

ExplorersWeb: If you now think back of the record day, what memories come to mind?

Sebastian: I had in mind to go for the record if the



"The schedule is completely wind dependent. If it blows, you move; if it doesn't, you sit. Consequently, your clock is constantly adjusting from day to night. It can be challenging." Image of full moon rising on Greenland, April 2010 (click to enlarge)
Image by Sebastian Copeland



"The same sastrugi vibration that reaped havoc with our powders applies to equipment, of course. I try to take great care of wrapping a jacket or sleeping bag around the gear to absorb some of the vibration." Image of Keith Heger, North Pole expedition 2009 (click to enlarge)
Image by Sebastian Copeland



"I prefer traveling with a partner, partly to make filming

conditions would cooperate. We had a couple of days posting good mileage which were nice warm-up runs.

But the truth is, this type of record is very condition specific. We were lucky.

We had covered 260 kilometers the previous day and the wind had not let up all night. Consequently, I was upbeat about going for the record early in the day. I had rigged big and was sailing overpowered.

Eric had rigged smaller. Thirty minutes in, the gap in speed was too great and I encouraged Eric to rig bigger. By the first hour and a half, we had covered almost 100 kilometers. The wind pulled back a little, but by mid day we were 390 kilometers in!

I thought if this keeps up, we would pulverize the record. Instead, the wind dropped consistently and was marginal for the last few hours. Those were tough. It is one thing cruising at speed when you're exhausted - it keeps you focused. Working the kite when you can barely walk is a real mental challenge.

But we kept chipping at it. For the most part, the snow ice was very soft, eventually turning to powder. We could not have hoped for better conditions. I think we passed the record during hour seventeen. The last couple of hours are a blur.

After we passed the previous record of 518 km, we agreed not to look at the GPS until we had reached the twenty four hour mark. As it is, due to our break schedule we stopped fifteen minutes short.

All I remember was how wrapping the lines (seventy meters' worth) was painful so tired I was! Our knees were shot! But again, we were really lucky with the conditions.

ExplorersWeb: *What difficult or not so pleasant experiences did you have on Greenland?*

Sebastian: Getting pinned down in the tent for 126 hours due to winds exceeding 80 miles per hour definitely isn't anybody's idea of a good time!

It isn't just being stuck in a 4 feet by 7 feet tent for that long, it's also the unrelenting sound of the tent walls vibrating in the wind -- like the roar of a jet engine.

Other than that, the schedule is completely wind dependent. If it blows, you move; if it doesn't, you sit.

Consequently, your clock is constantly adjusting from day to night. It can be challenging.

ExplorersWeb: *This was a preparation trip for your planned South Pole kite-supported coast to coast return expedition at the end of the year. What did you learn on Greenland that you would do different on Antarctica?*

Sebastian: We flew large Ozone Yakuzas for most of the trip; they were remarkable -- 12 and 14 meters on extended lines. One frustration with extended lines is twists that develop over time; they invariably lead to headaches. I had three lengths assembled together on my kite for a total of 70 meters.

I will look into asking Ozone to make custom extended lines which would reduce some of that variable. In cold weather, this is not what you want to spend your time dealing with!

Antarctica will likely involve a significant amount of skiing, less kiting.

But we had terrible time with protein powder and

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more interesting: when alone, it's tedious to have no one to film after a while." Image of Gentoo Penguin Rookery, Peterman Island Antarctica 2007 (click to enlarge)

Image by Sebastian Copeland



"It isn't just being stuck in a 4 feet by 7 feet tent for that long, it's also the unrelenting sound of the tent walls vibrating in the wind -- like the roar of a jet engine." Image of Passengers and crews of the Ice Lady Patagonia in the Gerlach Strait, Antarctica 2006; made in partnership with John Quigley. (click to enlarge) Image by



"Filming in cold environments is tough, and can quickly lead to cold injuries. [...] Ensuring that you have sufficient charged batteries within reach, as well as management of flash cards is very important." (click to enlarge)

Image by Sebastian Copeland

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electrolyte containment: the double layer freezer bags we zip locked them in were reduced to shreds from the intense shake and vibrations of moving at speed while kiting over sastrugi. The inside of our sleds were turned into sticky, wet, powdery mess that got into everything! Not to mention the loss of caloric powders.

In the end, small plastic containers with a screw on cap, wrapped in soft matter to absorb the shocks and vibration will definitely figure on next trip's preparation. Greenland kites take notice!

ExplorersWeb: *You are a professional photographer and took seven cameras on the Greenland expedition. How did you take care of your cameras while kiting?*

Sebastian: Seven cameras includes redundancy - in the event of failure - and specialized gear for very specific shots, as well as a low-rez update camera, and a straight up HD handycam. The number seems daunting, but you go through it pretty quick; it is mostly a weight issue for me!

The same sastrugi vibration that reaped havoc with our powders applies to equipment, of course. I try to take great care of wrapping a jacket or sleeping bag around the gear to absorb some of the vibration.

My main cameras are Canons, which I have travelled with from Antarctica to the North Pole and have always been amazed with their durability under stress. Same with Lexar cards: they have always performed flawlessly. That said, Greenland is not that cold in May and June: temps rarely plummet below fifteen below.

ExplorersWeb: *How easy is it to handle cameras in sub-zero temperatures and take so many photos and video footage?*

Sebastian: Filming in cold environments is tough, and can quickly lead to cold injuries.

By definition, mittens must be removed for at least some of the work, and this can be painful: a camera body is made of steel, which reflects the outdoor temps. I wear liners, which helps a bit.

Don't wait until the fingers are completely numb before getting into the mittens again, if you can help it! By then, the inside of the glove itself will be cold too, and there is no warmth in the fingers to heat it up.

Sometimes, of course, that is not possible... I try to place mittens inside my jacket until I need them again, so at least they stay warm!

Filming while kiting can be pretty sporty! I have some rigs which are designed to remove holding issues, but mostly, there is a balancing act involved which has led - on one occasion at least - to a pretty spectacular blow-out!

I prefer traveling with a partner, partly to make filming more interesting: when alone, it's tedious to have no one to film after a while.

Filming a trip of this nature can get boring for a viewer as each day blends into the next. My approach is to try and approximate the sense of a third party capturing the footage.

On this type of mission, you need to cover the demanding physical requirements of the expedition first - the filming goes on top of that. I try to pepper filming with some unique shots to keep it interesting. Sometimes a scene is so spectacular that it has to be filmed, even when you're cold or tired. It is also generally the case when conditions are really tough!

But it has to be done: in my experience, if you don't capitalize on opportunities, they generally don't occur again.

ExplorersWeb: *What advice do you have for polar skiers/kiters about cameras and filming on the ice?*

Sebastian: Protocols are imperative when filming in sub-zero to remove as many variables as possible. Ensuring that you have sufficient charged batteries within reach, as well as management of flash cards is very important.

Nothing worse than setting up to film in cold and difficult condition (those are the money shots), to find that the battery is dead, and the replacement buried at the bottom of the sled. It's good neither for the hands, nor for your partner who invariably waits in the cold as well. You've got to move fast while making sure that you have the shot.

Bring lots of flash cards, as you will likely not download while on the trail. Manage those well: exposed in one water proof container, and lots of unexposed ones within reach! And know where your gear is so as not to waste time looking for it.

ExplorersWeb: *What have you learned from Eric on Greenland?*

Sebastian: Eric is a great kiter and his patience was invaluable - especially helping me untangle those lines towards the last days of the trip!

I had traveled in the past with Eric's mother, my friend Matty McNair, and I picked up on some familiar family tricks on this one - small details in pre-rigging the tent that makes life easier on the trail! Short of that, he needs to work on his chess game!

Sebastian Copeland (46) is an award winning photographer, adventurer, author and environmental advocate, whose work has been featured on Larry King, NBC, ABC and Current TV as well as with National Geographic, Vanity Fair, GQ, Sierra Club, Publisher's Weekly, Elle, People, to name a few. His fine quality prints have appeared in museums and galleries around the world. These works can also be found in private collections in both the United States and Europe and several are now part of the permanent archive of The Natural World Museum in San Francisco.

A Summa Cum Laude graduate of UCLA Film School ('87), Sebastian - a British/French national relocated to NY in 1980 - began his career photographing celebrities and directing television commercials. His work has appeared in most major publications and many of his clients have been worldwide blue chip companies. The recipient of the prestigious International Photography Awards' 2007 Professional Photographer of the Year for his book 'Antarctica: The Global Warning', Sebastian has received top international honors in both fine art and advertising.

An international speaker on the climate crisis for over a decade, Sebastian chose to terminate his commercial work in 2000 and commit full time to his lifelong passion for extreme expeditions. This platform has served his fine art photography and more recently film production from the front lines of climate change. Sebastian has been featured on many international television and radio programs as an expert in the field.

His long-standing commitment to fight for the protection of the environment has lead to a seat on the Board of Directors of President Gorbachev's NGO Global Green USA. Sebastian's foundation SEDNA focuses on protecting the Arctic from wanton exploitation and a

relentless pursuit of a sustainable future.

Sebastian has led expeditions in Antarctica, the Arctic and in Greenland and holds, with partner Eric McNair-Landry, the world record for the longest distance travelled in a twenty four hour period on kites and skis.

His documentary 'Into The Cold - A Journey of the Soul' follows Sebastian and partner Keith Heger's expedition to the North Pole to commemorate the centennial reach of Admiral Peary in 1909. Completed in 2010, the film has won a number of awards and is presently in the festival circuit.

In 2008, Sebastian was named German GQ's Man of the Year for environmental leadership. Sebastian currently lives in Los Angeles and drives a hybrid.

[Biography courtesy of Sebastian Copeland]

Sebastian blogged and posted photos live over Contact 5 during the record breaking 2010 Greenland expedition as well as during the 2009 North Pole expedition when he and Keith skied the last 5 degrees to the Pole and he made the film, 'Into The Cold - A Journey of the Soul'.

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