

# Chasing Time

A FILM BY JEFF ORLOWSKI-YANG AND SARAH KEO



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE





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# Film Summary



Accompanied by the Emmy-winning team behind *Chasing Ice*, this exploration of time and mortality follows photographer James Balog as he brings his 15-year Extreme Ice Survey project to a close.

# Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and designed for people who want to use *Chasing Time* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. And be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

# Participants

## **James Balog**

Photographer, poet, Founder of the [Extreme Ice Survey](#), and the main subject of the film

## **Jeff Orlowski-Yang**

*Chasing Time* director and Balog's camera assistant from 2007 to 2009

## **Svavar Jónatansson**

Balog's field assistant and confidant since 2005

## **Dr. Hrafnhildur Hannesdóttir**

Glaciologist at the Icelandic Meteorological Office

# Key Issues

*Chasing Time* is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- Climate Change
- The Persuasiveness of Visual Evidence
- The Power of Photography, Art, and Narrative
- Mankind's Effect on Nature
- Time, Mortality, and Legacy
- Intergenerational Responsibility

# Background Information

## The Plight of the Glaciers

“The hour is fleeting.

The facts of life on Earth are clear,

and I submit them for candid consideration:

Human tectonics are changing the nature of nature.

We depend on the stability of the fundamental elements of the world.

An imbalance in the human element

leads to an imbalance in the other elements.

People are the only element that can choose to restore balance.”

-excerpt from James Balog’s poem, “The Human Element”

James Balog's Extreme Ice Survey consists of 72 cameras at 48 glaciers in Greenland, Iceland, the Alps, Alaska, and the northern Rockies, programmed to take photographs at regular intervals over 15 years. These images are compiled into time-lapse footage, showing the glaciers shrinking and melting at an alarming rate.

While Balog's approach is novel, the Extreme Ice Survey can be situated in a scientific lineage that stretches back more than a century. The earliest studies of glaciers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries combined careful observation, repeated measurements, and field immersion to track change over time. Naturalists such as Horace-Bénédict de Saussure and later Louis Agassiz established field camps directly on glaciers, drilled into the ice, and placed markers to measure movement and seasonal variation, producing some of the first systematic evidence that glaciers flow and change dynamically. By the late nineteenth century, scientists began routinely recording fluctuations in glacier length and mass as indicators of climate variability.

The increase in this variability due to the cascade effects of climate change has introduced a new urgency to the study of glaciers. Their slow, steady disappearance presents some of the strongest visual and environmental evidence for climate change—specifically, its acceleration: around 41% of the total loss of glacier ice since 1976 has occurred during the decade of 2015-2024. The loss of glaciers isn't just a loss of majestic, titanic beauty. Glacial melting contributes to the rise of sea levels, increased flooding, risks to freshwater supplies like rivers and streams, and the devastation of complex arctic and subarctic ecosystems.

In *Chasing Time*, Balog states that his goal is to bring attention to the loss of glaciers in a way that people can feel and understand. “Back in the beginning of the Extreme Ice Survey,” Balog says in the film, “people talked about climate change as being abstract and somewhere out in the future. The cameras brought tangible visual evidence of climate change to life.” By collapsing decades of gradual loss into digestible, stunning slideshows, audiences can better grasp the urgency of climate change and perhaps be spurred into taking action.

## **Art as a Form of Witnessing**

“Ice remembers.

Ice remembers all the heat and cold, all the snow and rain.

Ice sees and hears and feels the pulse of a changing world.”

-excerpt from James Balog’s poem, “Chimera in Alabaster”

Long before the era of climate science, artists and journalists have served as the world’s witnesses, turning their craft towards difficult, dangerous, confusing, and overlooked places and issues. From the war correspondents of the Civil War to the muckrakers of the Progressive Era, documentary art occupies a unique space between journalism and advocacy. Photography in particular carries an evidentiary weight that writing and statistics sometimes lack; a photograph argues a point by showing it. This tradition of bearing witness through image-making runs directly through Balog’s work and the ethos of the Extreme Ice Survey, situating *Chasing Time* within a long and honored lineage of artists who paired artistic craft with social conscience.

But an image needs a story, and a narrative adds urgency to the act of documentation. Psychology research shows that people respond to narrative more readily than data; a compelling narrative sticks in humans' minds 22 times more than facts alone. This can be seen as one of the central arguments behind *Chasing Time*. The vast scale and abstract numbers of climate change make it too abstract to grasp, its timeline too slow for our minds to hold. By fusing the precision and evidentiary weight of photojournalism with the emotional storytelling arc of the glaciers, Balog invites viewers to both **comprehend** and **feel** the climate crisis.

## **Time, Mortality, and Responsibility**

“We the people have an inalienable right

not just to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,

but to clean air,

clean water,

and the security of a stable atmosphere.

Our survival demands it.

Our children deserve it.”

-excerpt from James Balog's poem, “The Human Element”

One of the tensions at the heart of *Chasing Time* is the result of two competing relationships with time. Glaciers operate on a geologic scale of thousands of years of ice accumulation and their disappearance, while rapid by geological standards, still unfolds across decades. Balog, while in the midst of his multi-year survey project, is confronted with a foreshortened timeline: deteriorating knees, hip replacements, and ultimately, a devastating cancer diagnosis. Perhaps Balog puts it best himself: “These are living, breathing places. And they’re dying. Literally, I think about this every single day. And it’s because of the cancer that I’m forced to think about it.”

This entanglement of personal mortality and planetary loss connects Balog’s work to a much older tradition of thinking about humanity’s relationship to the Earth, inspired by beliefs that many Indigenous cultures have held for centuries. Among the Tlingit and Tagish peoples of Alaska, for example, glaciers are understood as living beings, entities with memory and agency whose well-being is bound up with the well-being of the people who live alongside them. The flipside of this belief is that we are not the owners of the land we live on. We are its temporary stewards, and we are accountable to generations of the past and the future.

Balog’s story embodies this idea, and his project creates both a testament to the future and a challenge to the present. By reconciling his own mortality with that of the glaciers, Balog reminds us that personal responsibility is intertwined with the responsibility we share for Earth—and for those that come after us.

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# DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion.

- What resonated with you most in *Chasing Time*?
- What were some important themes that emerged in the film?
- Were there any images or moments in the film that will stay with you? What made them so striking?
- Did the film change or deepen the way you think about climate change? If so, how?

## SEEING IS BELIEVING

The Extreme Ice Survey was built on a simple idea: people need to see climate change to understand it and feel it.

- When you hear the words “climate change,” what images appear in your head?
- Why might visual evidence be more persuasive than data or statistics alone?
- How did the timelapse footage make you feel? Did it have an emotional effect?
- Are there other examples in your own life where seeing something changed your understanding or motivated you to act?

## TIME IS MELTING AWAY

The film grapples with the mortality and timespans of human lives alongside the lives of glaciers. It draws a striking parallel between the inevitability of our own deaths and the possibility of the slow death of our natural world.

- How did Balog's struggle with his own health and mortality change how you related to the film's topic?
- The film asks us to think across vast scales of time—geologic time, a human lifetime, and the span of future generations. Which of these felt most real and urgent to you? Why?
- What do you think we owe to people who haven't been born yet? Does this idea shape the choices you make in your own life? Why or why not?
  - Additionally, what do you wish generations who came before you had done differently with regards to our shared world?
- At the end of the film, Balog's project lives on by passing the responsibility to future glacier visitors. What do you hope the next generation inherits from us?
- In what ways did you feel or witness grief in relation to the stories shared in the film? How might tending to grief be an overlooked aspect of climate change?
- How does facing the potential end of something change how you might live today?

# CLOSING QUESTION/ ACTIVITY

## OPTIONAL

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions:

- What skill, artform, or craft can you utilize to document and call attention to a pressing societal issue like climate change? What would that look like?
- What story or narrative would you pass on to future generations to help them understand the era that we're living in? Balog's story focuses on glaciers in order to gesture toward a wider issue. What element can your story focus on?
- Balog's art form goes beyond photography and encompasses the written word—excerpts from his poetry are threaded throughout this discussion guide. Write your own poem from the perspective of a glacier or other natural form. Try to tell the story of climate change from its perspective, including as much visual and emotional detail as you can.

## TAKING ACTION

***NOTE: Remember when aligning yourself with an organization to do your due diligence in learning about their practices, approaches, and missions ahead of time.***

If the group is having trouble generating their own ideas for next steps, these suggestions can help get things started:

- Learn more about the Extreme Ice Survey and James Balog's ongoing work. Visit the [Earth Vision Institute](#) to explore the full archive of glacier photography, timelapse footage, and scientific findings from the project. Consider sharing what you find with your networks.
- See the glaciers through your own eyes. Many of the glacier systems documented in *Chasing Time* are publicly accessible or viewable through organizations like the [National Park Service](#) and [NASA's Earth Observatory](#).

# CLOSING QUESTION/ ACTIVITY (cont.)

- Appreciate our world through other lenses. Much like the Extreme Ice Survey cameras, the [National Park Service](#) currently has more than a dozen publicly accessible webcams on its website, allowing users to view National Parks across the United States in real-time.
- Advocate for climate policy at the local level. Contact your city council members, school board, or local representatives to ask what climate commitments your community has made, and what more could be done.
- Support organizations working on glacial preservation and climate science. Groups like the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), the [Sierra Club](#), and local watershed conservation organizations rely on community support.

# Resources

*NOTE: Remember when accessing resources to read with a critical lens, this includes governmental and non-governmental organizations.*

## Climate.gov

Climate.gov provides a good entry point for those who want to build a broader understanding of climate change, full of updated research, resources, and opportunities for action.

## Earth Vision Institute

The nonprofit organization behind the Extreme Ice Survey, founded by James Balog. You can access the full archive of glacier timelapse footage, photography, and ongoing documentation projects.

## Iceland Nature Conservation Association

The Iceland Nature Conservation Association is an Icelandic non-profit organization of nature conservation enthusiasts with over 1400 registered members. Visit their site to learn more about Iceland's glaciers and the country's efforts to protect its exquisite natural highlands.

## Annual World Day for Glaciers

In an effort to address the plight of the glaciers, the UN General Assembly declared March 21 as the World Day for Glaciers. You can visit their site to learn more about international efforts to fight back against the loss of glaciers.

# Credits & Acknowledgments



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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