






Virgin Ground

Virgin mogul Richard Branson may be a kingpin of the mega-polluting aviation industry but the billionaire has nonetheless made himself clear: we have an obligation to clean up our planet. The latest item on his environmental agenda is a documentary filmed on Canada's Baffin Island that carries an important message – change is possible.

BY SARA BLASK PHOTOS RAGNAR AXELSSON



You know the environment has finally come to the forefront of at least a few agendas when the phrase “carbon neutral” is named the 2006 Word of the Year by the *Oxford American Dictionary*. Gone are the days when environmentalists were pegged as granola eating, tree hugging, locally grown hippies. Green is the new black, the new argyle, the new cool.

Enter Sir Richard Branson, the iconoclastic British billionaire, adventurer and Virgin commander-in-chief, whose latest ventures prove he has become one of the biggest environmental mavericks on the planet. In the past year, Branson has pledged approximately USD 3 billion in profits from his travel firms, including Virgin Atlantic and Virgin Trains, to be invested in renewable energy technologies. This February he announced a USD 25 million prize for anyone who can devise a plan to dampen global climate change by removing at least one billion tons of carbon dioxide a year from the Earth’s atmosphere.

And what’s next? Branson has joined the ranks of Al Gore and Leonardo DiCaprio and become involved in a new environmental documentary slated for release in spring 2008. The film’s message? To show the world that the effects of global warming have reached a critical mass – and that those most affected, the Inuits, have historically

left the smallest eco-footprint.

This winter Branson and his 21-year-old son, Sam, teamed up with veteran musher and Arctic explorer Will Steger for a leg of a 1,200-mile dogsledding expedition around Baffin Island, the fifth largest island in the world, located in Canada’s Nunavut territory. The still-untitled documentary project marks the launch of “Global Warming 101,” the first environmental education initiative of the eponymous Will Steger Foundation, a non-profit founded in January 2006 to raise public awareness among the up-and-coming generations about global warming.

“Young people are increasingly conscious of their interconnectedness with the world, and it has resulted in a greater understanding that climate change is affecting the most impoverished communities,” says Branson. “They’re passionate about making positive change and their commitment to be more thoughtful about how we live and consume will indeed help us preserve our most incredible resource, our planet.”

The Bransons joined Will Steger and his crew for a section of his expedition along with two guests, including six-time Everest summiter Ed Viesturs. Steger’s expedition took four months, traveling across the ice with a support crew to five remote villages, where they lived among







the Inuit natives, tracked weather patterns and filmed the poignant changes that global warming has wreaked upon the local environment and wildlife. As part of an educational platform, the expedition posted daily dispatches on its website, globalwarming101.com.

“We wanted to bear witness to the changes already happening in the Arctic and to see these Inuit people,” says Monica Ord, an executive producer and Richard Branson’s partner in the film. “The small scale is exactly what we’ll see on a much more massive scale in years to come if something’s not rapidly done.” The waters are rising, the ice is melting sooner every year and not just animals are affected – one elder on a hunting expedition lost both his legs when he fell through thin ice and suffered nearly fatal frostbite.

“Throughout history the Inuit were so in tune with their environment that if the wind blew a certain way, they knew what that meant. They knew how thick the ice was at every possible point. They knew when the animals were coming,” says Ord. “But now their weather patterns are so chaotic that it’s difficult for them to count on their own instincts anymore.”

The production advisor on the film is Lloyd Philips of *Zorro*, *Twelve Monkeys* and *Vertical Limit* fame, whose interest in the project

was initially sparked when he met Will Steger and an Inuit chief at a dinner in Los Angeles where the chief told a story about how his people have been forced to walk their children to school with guns so polar bears will not eat them.

Acclaimed Icelandic photographer Ragnar Axelsson, who had been on Baffin Island documenting a different expedition, met the Steger-Branson crew by happenstance in Clyde River (pop. 800), where they were staying in the same small hotel. They were so moved by Axelsson’s 2004 book about his Arctic travels, *Faces of the North*, that the team has since decided to use one of his photos from Baffin Island for the film’s poster and as the cover for the DVD when it is released next year.

“To paraphrase my wife Joan, ‘mankind caused the problem, surely mankind can find ways to solve the problem,’” says Branson. “Witnessing the impact of global warming on the Arctic and the Inuit people confirmed in my heart that each of us is deeply connected to people in remote corners of the world. These distant wildlife, environments, and communities are paying the consequences of our lifestyles. [And this is] something we can change and are starting to change for the preservation of our planet.”

