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Auckland filmmaker documenting threatened island

By Merilee Andrews

Briar March always has an eye out for a gripping story. Once the Bethells Beach born-and-bred film-maker is hooked, she's in all the way.

March's latest project is about a remote island 200km north-east of Papua New Guinea that is sinking, slowly but surely.

The island is Takuu, which each year loses 20cm to shifting tectonic plates and rising sea levels. Earlier this year, a king tide washed right over the island. None of which would be likely to merit a documentary in itself, were it not for the 600 native Takuu who live there – a small group who still practise traditions almost untouched by the modern world.

The island's habitable future, in years, can be measured on the fingers of one hand. As their home sinks beneath them, the islanders have no choice but to leave, probably to take refuge with their neighbour: politically unstable, malaria-ridden Papua New Guinea.

"I'm interested in how a community has to cope with such fundamental change," says March. "The problem is that there is no really good option for them."

The documentary will look at the islanders' uncertain future, with the help of English-speaking interpreters. One is a native who left the island, and is now a champion of its cause. The other is Auckland University anthropologist Richard Moyle, involved with the island for 14-odd years, who aims to complete a dictionary of the Takuu language.

The small documentary crew will go to the island in a few weeks, on one of just four scheduled boat-trips there each year.

It would be a bad time, muses director March, for someone to get appendicitis.

The filming costs are covered by Creative NZ's screen innovation fund, but none of the volunteer crew will be paid, and nor is there any spare cash to charter a boat.

The small crew will have their work cut out when they get to Takuu. They'll have to bring their own means of generating power for the camera batteries; there'll be no one on hand to fix equipment if it goes bung, and no trip out for at least another two months.

But they are determined to tell the story of a culture under threat, and one with lessons for all about dealing with climate change. Says co-producer and nzherald.co.nz content administrator Lyn Collie: "It's a global story. Somebody needs to tell it."

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Director Briar March, left, and co-producer Lyn Collie. Picture / Sylvie Whinray