

Originally, written for [Film Radar](#).



Chris Metzler and Jeff Springer have toured over 100 Film Festivals with their new ecological documentary **PLAGUES AND PLEASURES OF THE SALTON SEA**. Narrated by John Waters, the doc duo explore the lives of those who call an ecological disaster home. A surprising funny yet Recently, the two spoke to us about their new film.

I had always thought the problems of the Salton Sea were secluded to that area. One of the things I found startling is that the decay of the Salton Sea will eventually have an impact of the Palm Springs and Los Angeles areas. I thought it was a secluded problem. I know you cover it in the film but can you elaborate on that a bit?

Jeff: Because of water transfers they would move water that was currently used for Agricultural areas in the Imperial Valley they would use that for people in Los Angeles and San Diego. There would be less run off to the Sea and as a result the sea level will go down and it would expose sediments that could eventually become dust clouds. Along with Birds dying etc. One thing they could possibly try to prevent that is to keep a low amount of water in the sea. It's a hard question because the population is growing and people do need the water, it's a hard question as to who should have it.

What would it take to restore the Salton Sea that would be more inhabitable?

Jeff: It really just a varying amount of money. There are plans that involve pipelines from the Pacific, which would totally restore it. Then there is a cutting off the limbs to save the body approach. This would be to keep just enough water in there so apocalyptic dust clouds don't hit. It is unfortunate because it's such a great area, it wouldn't really restore it to what it could be. But at least, people in the surrounding areas wouldn't be hit so hard by the damages.

Chris: One thing think about ,Dave, is that the Salton Sea is totally inhabitable as it is right now.

It might not be the most ideal place for most of us. Obviously, a lot of people really do like it the way it is. The big problem is that the Salton Sea is not self sustaining in the sense that it requires agricultural run off. So, as Jeff eluded to, to make the Salton Sea continue to be inhabitable and maybe upgrade the water quality issues.. This would mean getting the water elsewhere or building a desalinization plant.

You paint Beverly Hills/Compton type relationship between the Palms Springs and the Salton Sea are. The film was selected to the Palm Springs Film Festival, how was it received there?

Chris: Jeff unfortunately didn't get to go because he was shooting in Europe. The film went over really well in Palm Springs. It was quite exciting. After screening the film in over a hundred festivals around the world, it was nice to bring it right into the Salton Sea's own backyard. What was most exciting was that Mary Bono, Sonny's widow and congresswoman for the area who has championed the cause,. was there to host a Q&A afterwards and be able to answer a lot of the questions that folks in the audience had about what they could do. One of the screenings was attended by 500-600 people, this was the first , that after the credits were rolling, people were standing up with questions. They weren't asking questions

(like other festival audiences)

"Is Hunky Daddy really that crazy?" or "How can I see Donald the nudist?"

It was "My god, we live so close to this and I have never gone down to the Salton Sea." And it was turned more into a community meeting rather than vs. an actual film screening. That why is nice to have Mary Bono and the head of the Salton Sea authority there.

I think a lot of people just said “I have just heard so many bad things about this area that I just decided never to go. Now I recognize that things are a bit more complicated.”

I think it’s remarkable how many people in Palm Springs are just not aware or have really bad perceptions. Early on in the filming we wandered into a (Palm Springs) tourist office and we asked about the “Salton Sea” area.. She actually discouraged us from going there. This is a problem with the Sea in general and this is all over Southern California. Either people haven’t heard of it period or if they have heard of it, they have heard really bad things. That was one of our main objectives; just to let people know about it. To give it objective perspective, to let people know what is going on. That’s it’s main problem just awareness, I think.

Your movie features an all star cast of Local Color, how did you find these folks?

Chris: Just walking around a lot of the time. Literally, most of the people we found; we just bumped into. I think it was just being open to whatever comes our way. We would have our camera and be like “Hey can we start filming or set something up for later?”

There are a few that we featured like Norm the activist who’s featured and Steve from the (wildlife) park. We knew they were involved with the Sea. Pretty much the other people we heard about or just bumped into.

The folks you interview seem eternally optimistic, when the situation is not. What do you think keeps them going?

Chris: I think it’s just a really great place. Yeah there is some smell occasionally but the weather is really nice. And a lot of people are there because they really enjoy it. One of the people, Joe Martin, he’s a little bit depressed because he can’t sell his house and go somewhere else. On the other hand he did move there to retire. A lot of these people are older than you would imagine. These people are in their nineties and still going strong.

It's amazing they don't look it. Some have arthritis and don't want to live in the cold.

They do really enjoy it.

The movie took four years to make. You spent four years in a town that is decaying did that take any toll on you personally?

Jeff: We weren't living there for four years. We just kind of went down for periods of time and come back. Shoot some and come back and edit a bit. Then we maybe we could follow this story a bit more and follow up.. It didn't take it took a toll on us.

Chris: Lot of sunburns. When you go into the heat with a sunburn it really gets to you.

The middle of the day is really difficult. Especially when you are out all day long.

How did you manage to melt a camera during the shooting?

Jeff: It just stopped. It was during the summer months. IT just gets really, REALLY hot. And it was having some digital glitching and was having all these problems. When digital tape gets hot it basically contracts, so it started messing the inside. What was really nice is that Cannon helped us get a new camera.

John Waters isn't normally involved in Eco-films. How did he become involved?

Jeff: It was surprisingly easy. We were screening the film at a festival in Texas. It was a different version. Not a rough cut, but we had always planned on doing something different with the voiceover. It was a bit longer. We mentioned to the Festival Director that we were really interested in getting John to do the voice over. And she said "Well, he happens to sit on our

board. I can help you get a tape to him.” And he said “Yes.” It was surprisingly simple.

We found out later, when we were in Provincetown, people were like “How the hell did you get John to do the voiceover ? That’s crazy”

We realized he does a lot of interviews, but rarely does voiceovers for people. I guess he just really had an attachment to the characters. I’m sure it’s characters more than the ecological issues.

Chris: I think it’s where John wants to retire. I guess we should ask him that. He called the movie real estate porn.

While the ecological issues in the film are really important and it’s exciting to have the film theatrically released prior to Earth Day, the thing that really dressed the area was this unique cast of characters who have decided to make this so-called ecological disaster home. I think that is sort of the M.O. for John Waters. People who decide to live their lives in different ways. And saying “Hey, ya know this place has a unique value”

Jeff: His own movies tell the story of the underdog. And that’s what these people definitely are. There are a lot of ecological films out there, I don’t know if you call them :”dry,” but you are dealing with issues with animals or the environment and it loses that human connection. What we wanted to show was an ecological issue, but show the human side of it. I think people can relate to the human side of it and become more involved with it.

At your theaters you have started a post card writing campaign to the Governor. Have you heard from him?

Jeff: We’ve been continually trying to get a screening with the Governor for quite awhile. Obviously, he is a little busy. But now with his new embrace of all things green. We’re hoping that might change things around. The short answer is “no,” but we are keeping our fingers crossed.

Your film is more of a traditional documentary, rather the recently popular op-ed documentary. Do you think there will be a return to more traditional “reporting” style doc?

Jeff: I think the form is really flexible in lot of ways. I think It could go any way. A documentary doesn't need to be one certain way.

Chris: Maybe the thing to think about Dave. Some of the more popular documentaries commercially, maybe are these first person perspective documentaries, ala what Michael Moore, has done. Documentaries have gone gangbusters in the last few years. This big issue is distribution and getting them in front of people. One of the things that Jeff and I thought of when we started out with this project, we wanted to explore these real life people and tell their story. We also didn't want to forgo what was a hopefully a cool looking film and also entertaining. Those are the important values that will sustain documentary filmmaking , Like what Errol Morris has done or Chris Smith with American Movie.

What's next?

Chris: There is long list. We have kind of juggled projects at the same time after spending a few years on Salton Sea. The topics runs the gamut from taxidermy, gay truckers, Evangelical Backpackers and a documentary on the punk rock band Fishbone.

They're one of my favorite bands (Editor's note: Fanboy gush omitted)

Jeff: We spent the summer filming their tour in Europe.