

Documentary Feature Film

Website
Educational Curriculum

Producers
David Vassar | Sally Kaplan
Christian White

BACKCOUNTRY PICTURES

209.795.2851
backcountrypictures.com
dvassar@backcountrypictures.com



Exquisite Wasteland shatters the popular myth that deserts are lifeless, barren, and worthless. In fact, they are home to astonishing biodiversity, extraordinary animals, unknown and unnamed species, verdant oases, soul stirring landscapes and an unfolding Native American story that spans 10,000 years.

The widely held misperception of desert as 'wasteland' continues to justify destructive industrialization that now threatens one of the largest intact and pristine natural realms remaining on the North American continent.

Audiences may enter the film with the notion of desert as barren and worthless, but leave with an entirely different understanding.

Exquisite Wasteland takes them there.

Synopsis

Selected scenes provide insight to the film's content and dramatic arc:

Aerial images sail above vast desert landscapes stretching to infinity. In time, Interstate-15 comes into view, snaking its way across the Mojave Desert between L.A. and Vegas. Traffic is moving smoothly, then builds until it's bumper to bumper. Then stops. Completely.

Inside one car, a Young Couple curses their fate. The driver slams the vehicle into gear, jumps the shoulder, and hightails out an unnamed dirt road. When it dead-ends at a gaping arroyo they slide sideways to stop, take a deep breath and cautiously ease out of the car.

Middle of nowhere.

Nothing.

They venture into the unfamiliar desert landscape. Now, walking softly on the dune, they take off their shoes to feel the sand underfoot. Soon the ocean of dunes reflects the setting sun, transforming them into a frozen sea of gold. The shadows of the Young Couple grow longer until they shrink to faint silhouettes and then, disappear completely. Leaving us alone in the humbling silence and endless beauty of a star filled desert night where whole galaxies tumble across the inky blackness.

The story of water in the desert opens with a clip from the 1948 classic western, "YELLOW SKY." Cowboys on horseback ride slowly across the Badwater salt flats in Death Valley. The Last Rider takes a drink from his canteen, gags, and spits it out. "I sure never thought it'd come to this. But, I guess I'm gonna' have to trade some real nice whiskey for some water." He shrugs with thirsty disappointment.

A MONTAGE portrays the delicate beauty and surprising variety of plants and animals found within desert canyons where spring fed waters run year round. Aquatic biologist Kevin Wilson illuminates; "Without a reliable source of water desert life simply cannot survive."

In a flurry of images, water is furiously pumped from the desert. It runs through canals and ditches to flood massive fields of alfalfa and citrus. Vegas hotels feature fantasy pools and monolithic fountains.

Water gushes from a 4-foot pipe into a huge desert lake. Activist David Lamfrom explains that the Cadiz Water Project proposes to pump 800-billion gallons of water from beneath the Mojave Desert, one of the driest places on earth. Water that would be piped to L.A.

Kevin Wilson states, "The more we pump, the deeper the water table drops. As the aquifer sinks, the water in isolated springs dries up. The cornerstone of survival for desert plants and animals is being sucked dry." Chemehuevi tribal elder, Matt Leivas adds a human perspective; "Water is the most precious element in the whole universe. It is the life blood of our people." Michael Madrigal, Director of the Native American Land Conservancy concludes; "These springs are at the center of our creation story. If they go dry, we lose the bedrock of our culture, as well as the connections to our ancestors, our history, our identity."

An actor portrays the Old Prospector who leads his burro across desert vistas, through ghost towns, and abandoned mines, chronicling the cycle of 'boom and bust' in the Desert Southwest. Part history, part legend, he traces the arc of industrial development on desert lands and the absence of any moral, legal, or criminal consequence for those who would destroy it.

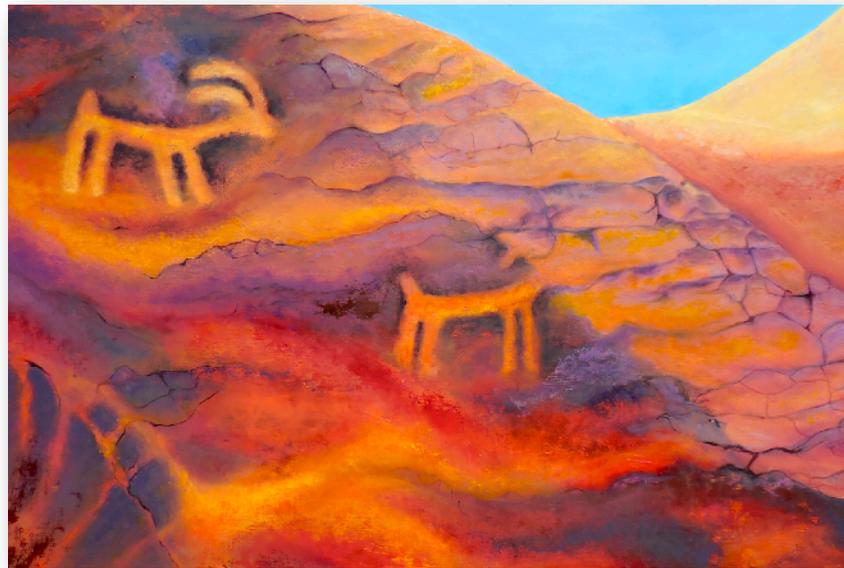


The Old Prospector | Monotony Valley, Nevada | 2018

The story of military exploitation on desert lands begins with a FLASH of light that blasts the desert floor. The billowing mushroom cloud from the atomic bomb rises into the azure blue sky. We hear the voice of author, Terry Tempest Williams: "A blank spot on a desert map translates into empty space. Space devoid of people. A wasteland. Perfect for used razor blades, nerve gas, toxic waste, and atomic bombs."

The atomic cloud lifts to reveal a MONTAGE of haunting desert landscapes and unique animals that are protected within the Desert National Wildlife Refuge in Southern Nevada - one of the largest tracts of pristine desert wilderness remaining in North America. Activist Jose Witt spells out the intentions of the Air Force to take more than 300,000 acres from the Refuge to expand their military training ground. "If the Air Force wins this battle, nearly all of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge will be closed to the public. The plants and animals who live here will find themselves in the crosshairs."

We meet two artists; Fawn Douglas, a painter of Paiute descent, and Susan K. Schafer, a wildlife photographer and watercolorist. We see the Refuge through their eyes, experience their emotional connections to the landscape and understand how it inspires their life's work.



Painting by Fawn Douglas

Sharon declares, "Most people value Yosemite. How would you feel if Yosemite was taken away from you?" Fawn declares, "It would be complete sadness if I could not sit here where my ancestors sat and rested and talked. It would break my heart."

The final story in the film is the most crucial chapter now unfolding on the Great American Desert; one that bears witness to the enduring power of the 'wasteland' myth. The Trump Administration has removed Federal protection from more than two-million acres of magnificent desert wilderness within Grand Staircase-Escalante and Bears Ears National Monuments in Utah. These crown jewels of the Great American Desert are being opened to strip mining, fracking, cattle grazing, water mining, agriculture, and dumping of nuclear waste.

The last scene in the film is composed of very tight shots - eyes, hands, feet - as two climbers scale a treacherous desert peak. When they reach the top we recognize them as the Young Couple from the traffic jam that opened the film. From their lofty perch they bask in the endless desert panorama. They, along with the audience, have come full-circle. The desert they now see is far more than they imagined.



Photo by Sharon K. Schafer



Frame from Exquisite Wasteland | Mojave Desert | California | 2019

We hear a woman's voice:

"Time and space.
In the desert there is space. Space is the twin sister of time.
Time and space. This partnership is holy.
We remember why we love the desert;
it is our tactile response to light, to silence, and to stillness."

Terry Tempest Williams

FADE TO BLACK

THE END

Conservation Partners



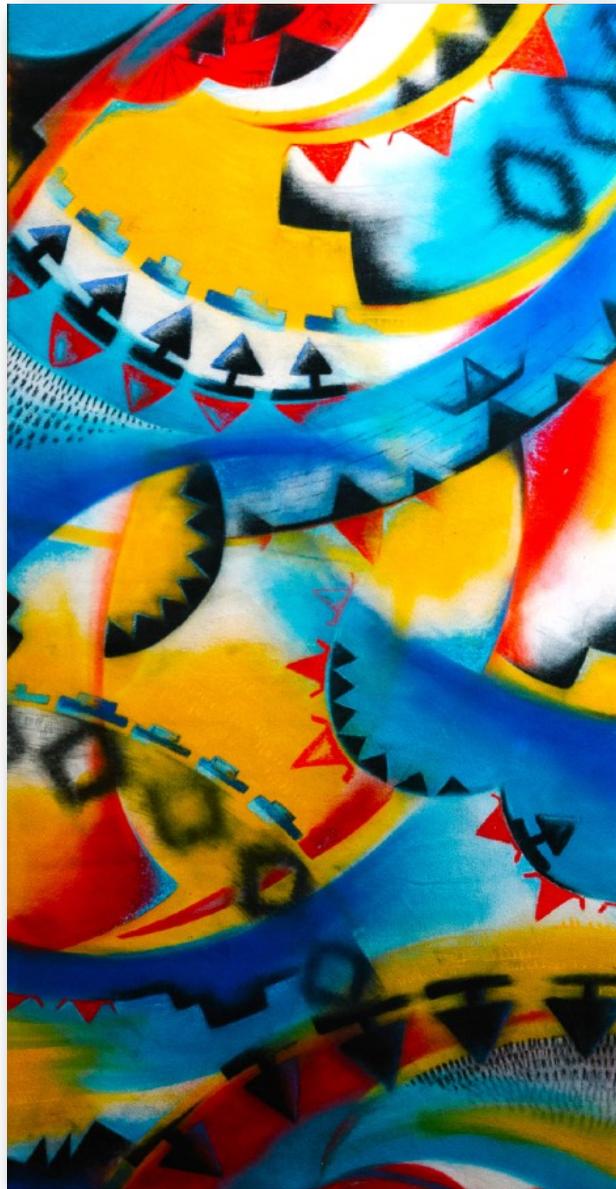
Throughout the process of research, scouting and production the Producers have established relationships and partnered with a number of desert conservation groups across the Desert Southwest. These stakeholders have assisted in identifying critical desert issues. A few organizations and individuals provided seed monies to get the film up and running. As Exquisite Wasteland nears completion and release, these partners can be counted on to build awareness of the film communicating directly with members through their websites and social media.

Included are:

Amargosa Conservancy
Anza Borrego Foundation
Basin and Range Watch
Bodie Hills Conservation Partnership
California State Parks
California Native Plant Society
California Wilderness Coalition
Chemehuevi Paiute Tribe
Death Valley National Park
Desert Protective Council

Friends of Nevada Wilderness
Granite Mountains Desert Research Center
UC Natural Reserve System
High Desert Conservation Committee
Morongo Basin Conservation Assn.
Mojave Desert Land Trust
National Parks and Conservation Assn.
Native American Lands Conservancy
Sierra Club
Western Lands Project

Testimonials



Painting by Fawn Douglas

“Exquisite Wasteland will tell the stories of the spectacular deserts that are at real risk of being lost, and of the people who defend these places. Sharing the voices and images of this beautiful country will help shift public perception of the desert, away from that of a wasteland to be squandered and towards that of a wonderland to be protected.”

David Lamfrom, Director, California Desert and National Wildlife Programs
[National Parks & Conservation Association](#)

“The vast and biologically diverse Desert Southwest encompasses some of the last thriving ecosystems on planet earth and is a cornerstone of our cultural heritage. Yet deserts are misunderstood and much-maligned by those who seek to exploit it. Exquisite Wasteland will provide a candid and accurate portrayal of our deserts to a wide audience at a critical time. I strongly believe that this film is an essential tool for igniting a lasting constituency for desert protection”

James M. André, Director, [Granite Mountains Desert Research Center](#)

“We are honored to offer this endorsement of Exquisite Wasteland. The high quality and compelling nature of this film will have a significant impact on our efforts to prevent grave threats to the special places that all Americans must protect for current and future generations. We feel certain that Exquisite Wasteland will provide clarity and build a stronger constituency for desert protection into the future.”

Michael J. Madrigal, Cahuilla Band of Indians - President, [Native American Lands Conservancy](#)

“If intelligent decisions are to be made about the desert lands the public needs to be informed of the value of these lands and the need for their protection into the future. We strongly believe that Exquisite Wasteland will make a powerful contribution to this continuing effort of education. We urge you to support this film.”

Terry Frewin, Chair, [Sierra Club](#) Desert Committee

“Our organization has been working to protect and conserve places in California's desert since 1976. We strongly believe that Exquisite Wasteland will help dispel the myth that the desert is devoid of beauty, life, or importance. Getting people to appreciate the desert is half the battle in getting them to take action to protect it.”

Linda Castro, Assistant Policy Director, [California Wilderness Coalition](#)

“Mojave Desert Land Trust wishes to be added to the organizations endorsing Exquisite Wasteland. We believe it will help improve understanding of the importance of the desert and its fragile ecosystems. We hope this film will awaken new desert defenders through an appreciation of role it plays in the overall health of our planet.”

Geary Hund, Executive Director, [Mojave Desert Land Trust](#)



“Knowing is the key to caring. With caring there is hope that people will be motivated to take positive action. They might not care even if they know, but they can’t care if they don’t know.”

Dr. Sylvia Earle

Creative Team

DAVID VASSAR - Producer, Writer, Director



David is an Oscar® nominated and Emmy Award® winning filmmaker who continues a distinguished career in filmmaking. He learned the craft of writing and directing in the Film Unit of the Smithsonian Institution where he served an apprenticeship under Karen Loveland and Charles Eames.

His films have been selected for screening and honored with awards by the Chicago, Atlanta, Miami, San Francisco, American, Hawaii, Wild & Scenic, American Conservation, CINE, Environmental, and Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festivals. In 2016, the Smithsonian Institution presented a retrospective of David's films in celebration of the National Park Centennial. In 2018, he received the John de Graff Award from the Wild & Scenic Film Festival acknowledging his "life-long commitment to environmental filmmaking."

In addition to programs about the natural world, David has produced and directed films about the La Guardia High School for the Performing Arts in New York City, the return of Hong Kong to China, and an exploration of the ancient Maya of Central America for *Lost Civilizations* (1996), winner of the national Emmy® for Best Informational Series.

In the 1990s, David was a primary director for the highly rated NBC television series, *Unsolved Mysteries*. In 2003, he wrote and directed a one hour special hosted by Roger Mudd; *Save Our History – Yellowstone*. David also wrote and directed the destination film for Yosemite National Park, *Spirit of Yosemite* (2001). Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival named '*Spirit*' "Best Special Venue Program. Sony presented the film at Cannes as "Outstanding Achievement in Digital Cinema."

In 2001, David launched his production company, Backcountry Pictures, with producing and writing partner, Sally Kaplan. *Discover Hetch Hetchy* (2006) is their award-winning short film hosted and narrated by Harrison Ford that advocates for dam removal and the restoration of Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park. It won Best Short Film at Wild & Scenic, and was a finalist at Jackson Hole. *Grand Teton Video Rivers* (2006) is the destination film for the visitor center in Grand Teton National Park. David and Sally produced and presented their two-part documentary, *California Forever* (2012) on PBS. They started development and production of *Exquisite Wasteland* in 2016.

SALLY KAPLAN - Producer & Co-Writer



Sally is an award-winning producer and writer with over twenty years of film and television experience. Partnering with David Vassar and Backcountry Pictures in 2001, Sally has served as producer on *Discover Hetch Hetchy*, *Grand Teton Video Rivers*, *Perspective From The Peaks*, *Red White and Green*, and *California Forever*.

Additionally, Sally worked as a field producer and writer on programs for PBS, Discovery Channel, Travel Channel, Animal Planet, and many others. She served as guest artist and associate professor of Film and Video at NYU, UCLA, University of Colorado, Naropa Institute and was a Fellow of the Colorado Council on the Arts.

Sally's short screenplay, *Crossroads*, was produced through the American Film Institute's Directing Workshop for Women. Sally was Executive Editor of a 9-panel video installation for the acclaimed exhibit on DNA at the Smithsonian Institution. She was the Associate Producer on the film celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, directed by Academy Award winner Aviva Slesin as well as an exhibit film for the Metropolitan Museum of Art on the Art of Indonesia. Sally currently serves as Producer and co-writer on *Exquisite Wasteland*.

CHRISTIAN WHITE - Producer & Editor

With over 30 festival awards for features and documentaries, Christian has decades of film and television experience including editorial, consulting, producing and directing. He has edited numerous projects for Backcountry Pictures including *California Forever* and *Discover Hetch Hetchy*. Christian is a multifaceted, fiercely creative talent who owns and operates a full 4K post-production studio. He brings his formidable experience as an editor and producer to *Exquisite Wasteland*.

CHRISTOPHER TUFTY - Director of Photography

Emmy award-winning Director of Photography Christopher Tufty has worked with David Vassar for more than 30 years. Together, David and Chris created *Canyon Consort*, *River in Disguise*, *Spirit of Yosemite*, *Discover Hetch Hetchy*, *Grand Teton Video Rivers* and *California Forever*.

Along with his work with Backcountry Pictures, Chris has served as Director of Photography for ten feature films and a number of episodic television programs. His experience as Camera Operator includes over 300 features, TV shows, documentaries, commercials, shorts, music videos, and industrials. Chris served as Camera Operator on nearly 80 episodes of *The Closer* for TBS. Currently Chris and David continue their creative collaboration on *Exquisite Wasteland*.



Exquisite Wasteland - Production Status



Exquisite Wasteland is currently in production.

In 2015, the Producers raised seed monies from individuals and organizations to fund early development. To determine the intellectual, regional and political scope of the film they assembled a team of academic advisors, conducted research and interviewed a variety of stakeholders including activists, journalists, historians, artists and scientists.

In 2016, David and Sally travelled more than 2,500 miles throughout the deserts of California, Nevada and Arizona scouting and photographing potential locations and pre-interviewing desert advocates who would appear in the film. In the same year, they completed their Final Draft of the Film Treatment that serves as the shooting script. They also completed one week of location filming and edited a short [Preview Clip](#) illustrating the intellectual content and creative style of the documentary feature.

In 2017, KQED-San Francisco expressed their interest in becoming the Presenting Station for the national broadcast and distribution of Exquisite Wasteland on PBS (See Page 15).

In February and March of 2018, the Producers completed eighteen days of filming that yielded three additional stories. They now have enough uncut footage to edit 25-35 minutes of finished film; nearly a third of the documentary feature is 'in the can.'

In 2019, the Producers received a grant from Patagonia to edit a web video entitled "[REFUGE](#)" for Friends of Nevada Wilderness and their campaign to Save the Desert National Wildlife Refuge. The Air Force wants to take 300,000 acres from the Refuge for use as a bombing range and military training ground. Friends of Nevada Wilderness relied upon the web video to provide background ahead of their meetings with Nevada legislators. Both the Nevada State Assembly and Senate passed [resolutions](#) with nearly unanimous, bi-partisan support urging the U.S. Congress to oppose the Air Force expansion into the Refuge.

This year 'REFUGE' received the Silver Addy Award for 'Public Service Online Film' from the American Advertising Federation. The short film also won a screening slot on Opening Night of the American Documentary Film Festival. Within Exquisite Wasteland 'REFUGE' will serve as a primary story.



Funding To Date | Completion Budget

Since beginning development in 2015, the Producers have raised \$181,500.

This funding was disbursed for research, location scouting, writing, four weeks of location filming and editing.

To date the film is 12% under budget with enough material 'in the can' to edit 25-30 minutes of cut film.

The current goal is to raise the funding required to complete Principal Photography and Post-production of the 75-minute documentary feature through finish and release.

Three of the primary stories for Exquisite Wasteland have already been shot; the Cadiz Water Project, the Desert National Wildlife Refuge, and Renewable Energy. Staged vignettes with the Old Prospector have also been shot.

The budget for filming the additional stories and edit to finish the 75-minute documentary feature film is \$750,000.

The complete line-item budget for the remaining Production and Post-production expenditures, website and educational curriculum is available upon request.



Completion Schedule

Extreme temperatures do not permit desert filming in peak summer months. The following suggests a best-case scenario and is dependent upon funding in hand no later than December 31 2019.

2020

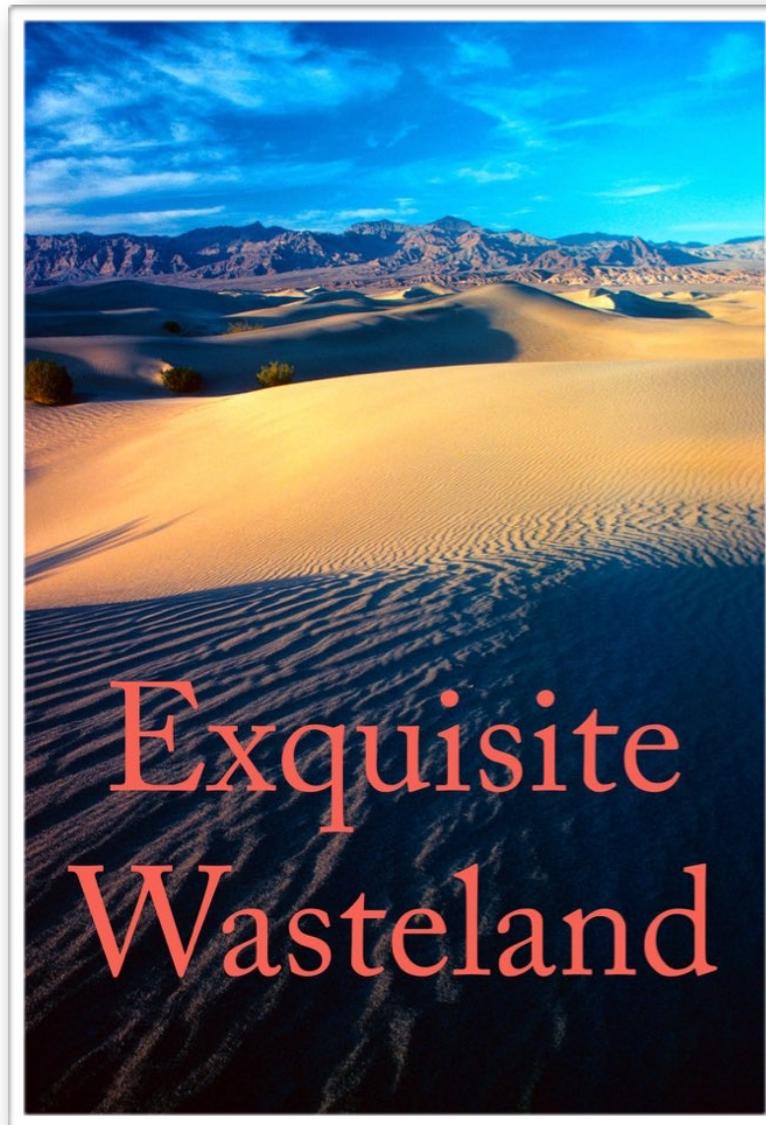
Jan - Feb	Final research, scouting, pre-production.
Mar - Apr	Shoot 2nd Unit Natural History Shoot Documentary Stories - California & Nevada
May	Shoot - Dramatic Vignettes
Jun	Documentary Shooting - Utah
Jun 30	Complete all shooting
Jul 1	Start Edit
Sep 1	First Cut
Nov 15	Fine Cut Engage PR Firm Seek pre-sales distribution/finishing funds

2021

Feb	Complete color correct, graphics and sound
Mar	Film Complete Screen for festivals and distributors
May - Jun	Release

Release dates for public Website and Educational Curriculum TBD.

Distribution & Marketing



Exquisite Wasteland is intended for limited theatrical release followed by digital streaming, television or cable, and finally, DVD & BluRay distribution.

The Producers have built solid partnerships with a number of national and regional conservation organizations and Native American leaders. Well before the film's release these organizations will assist in building word of mouth around the film through their web pages and social media.

The Producers will enter the completed film in festivals that have selected their past programs for awards and screenings. These include the Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival, Wild and Scenic Film Festival, Environmental Film Festival, American Documentary Film Festival, and San Francisco Green Film Festival. The strategy also includes submitting for screening slots in mainstream festivals such as Sundance, Toronto and AFI Silverdocs in order to secure distribution and build an audience for the theatrical release and streaming.

In 2016, David Vassar was honored with a retrospective of his National Park films by the Smithsonian Institution and the Environmental Film Festival. The program was also presented at the Presidio of San Francisco, San Diego Natural History Museum, and David Brower Center in Berkeley.

In 2012, the Producers presented their PBS special, "California Forever," as the prestigious Horace M. Albright Lecture in Conservation, UC Berkeley, School of Natural Resources. On July 15, 2019, the Producers presented a lecture and film clips detailing their work on Exquisite Wasteland at Stanford University.

Ahead of the general release and PBS broadcast the Producers will work with these prestigious venues to host sneak previews of the film.

Web & Curriculum Content

The theatrical release, streaming, broadcast and cable transmission of *Exquisite Wasteland* should be seen as the 'first life' of the film. Equally important is the film's 'after life' in the digital and educational realms. By creating an easily accessible digital portal for the general public - "Desert Gateway" - and a curriculum for K-12 and college level educators and students - "Desert Universe" - the content of the film and critical issues raised will cascade to a much wider audience.

Desert Gateway

The interactive public website is envisioned as a dramatic, engaging and illuminating digital experience that will attract large numbers of visitors. An active photo and video-centric social media campaign will include Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Whatsapp and Twitter will capture attention and drive users to the site. The goal of Desert Universe is to generate enthusiasm for desert preservation; people power that can be harnessed by ongoing preservation campaigns.

The development and launch of Desert Gateway will be rolled out in a series of organic upgrades. The site will go live while the film is still in production. As the production team travels to different deserts they will share their impressions and insights as well as the knowledge they learn from desert experts. During post-production as the shape of the film emerges, the edited sequences will inform the selection and creation of web pages and content.

Ahead of theatrical release, the site will add a press section where a complete set of promotional assets - preview clips, still photos, press releases, biographies of the creative team - will be available to the media. After the film's release the site will come to life as individual users add blogs, photos and videos of their own desert journeys.

It is anticipated that the number of visitors to Desert Gateway will exceed the audience for the film. The intent is to create a digital platform where curiosity about the desert is transformed into knowledge and understanding.

Desert Universe

This 'living curriculum' is designed to provide elementary, middle, high school and college instructors and their students with the resources to build a vibrant exploration of one of the most valuable and misunderstood ecosystems on our planet. The Desert Universe curriculum will help teachers inspire their students to explore the science, culture and history of the region, then go a step further by creating their own elements for the *Exquisite Wasteland* project and build a community desert activists.

The curriculum will be based on the most current information available with more added as the project unfolds. It will initially be organized to follow the text, 'The California Deserts, An Ecological Rediscovery,' by Bruce Pavlik. Dr. Pavlik serves as a key advisor to the film and curriculum, and is joined by an advisory board of desert researchers. However, the real contributors and builders of this project are the students guided by instructors and encouraged to seek solutions to ongoing and emerging desert issues as well as illuminating this amazing ecosystem and destination for discovery.

The Desert Universe curriculum will be unique in that it targets a subject area with currently very few resources and adds greatly to the perspective of anyone studying Environmental Science and the impact on key areas of the planet by technology advances, climate change and human evolution.

The curriculum also offers a unique opportunity for students to add to the body of knowledge of desert ecology (somewhat ignored by science) through their own investigations. An example would be the notion that much of the desert flora has not yet been researched and catalogued. How might students become assistants in that research through communication with scientists and crowd sourced data?



January 3rd, 2017

Sally Kaplan and David Vassar
Backcountry Pictures
P.O. Box 309
Murphys, CA 95247

Dear Sally Kaplan and David Vassar,

Thank you for sharing your proposal for *Exquisite Wasteland* with KQED. Given the negative perception of deserts in popular culture, viewers are sure to enjoy the surprising and eye-opening journey into the rich flora, fauna and history of these so-called “wastelands.” While incredibly informative, the subject also provides an excellent opportunity for Backcountry Pictures to take full advantage of its ability to capture gorgeous natural settings. Given the proven success of *California Forever*, we believe *Exquisite Wasteland* will merit PBS distribution.

As you complete *Exquisite Wasteland*, we would like to discuss partnering with you again for national broadcast distribution. Like before, we would support it with a nationwide station relations campaign, including sending an introductory letter and DVD to programmers at hundreds of public television stations, promoting the program at national conferences, and placing personal calls to encourage programmers to include the film in their schedules. KQED Presents has been working with independent producers to maximize national and international distribution for more than a decade, and we present approximately 35 hours of content nationally each year. Consequently, we have earned a reputation as a trusted source of innovative and engaging public media content.

While broadcast and carriage decisions are subject to final content review by our programming team, as well as dependent on public broadcasting guidelines and standards, we feel confident that *Exquisite Wasteland* will meet the high standards required for broadcast and we look forward to seeing the program.

Sincerely,

Susie Hernandez
Shernandez@kqed.org
Program Director
KQED

PUBLIC TELEVISION 2601 Mariposa Street kqed.org
PUBLIC RADIO San Francisco CA
INTERACTIVE 94110-1426
EDUCATION