

An Entertaining Disaster

There's beauty and despair aplenty in
Plagues & Pleasures of the Salton Sea

By JOHN THRELFALL

For every Michael Moore, Errol Morris or Ken Burns in the documentary film scene, there are hundreds (if not thousands) of smaller, relatively unknown directors toiling away to bring their own quirky view of the world to a greater audience. Fortunately, every hit the biggies have makes it easier for the small fries to get their stories out there. Case in point? Chris Metzler and Jeff Springer's *Plagues & Pleasures of the Salton Sea*, one of the strangest but most intriguing documentaries to cross the screen of late.

Once touted as "California's Riviera," the Salton Sea is actually a salt lake originally created by an engineering mistake back in the early days of the 20th century. The plan was to irrigate the desert of southern California with water from the nearby Colorado River, but nature (of course) had other ideas; rather than create usable irrigation canals, the whole area soon flooded, growing into an immense inland sea stretching 35 miles by 15 miles. Enter profit-hungry land developers, who saw cash reflected in the vast blue waters and quickly came up with the idea of selling parcels of land to the incoming wave of California immigrants. Then someone had the bright idea of stocking the lake with fish, so it could be touted as a sportsman's paradise.

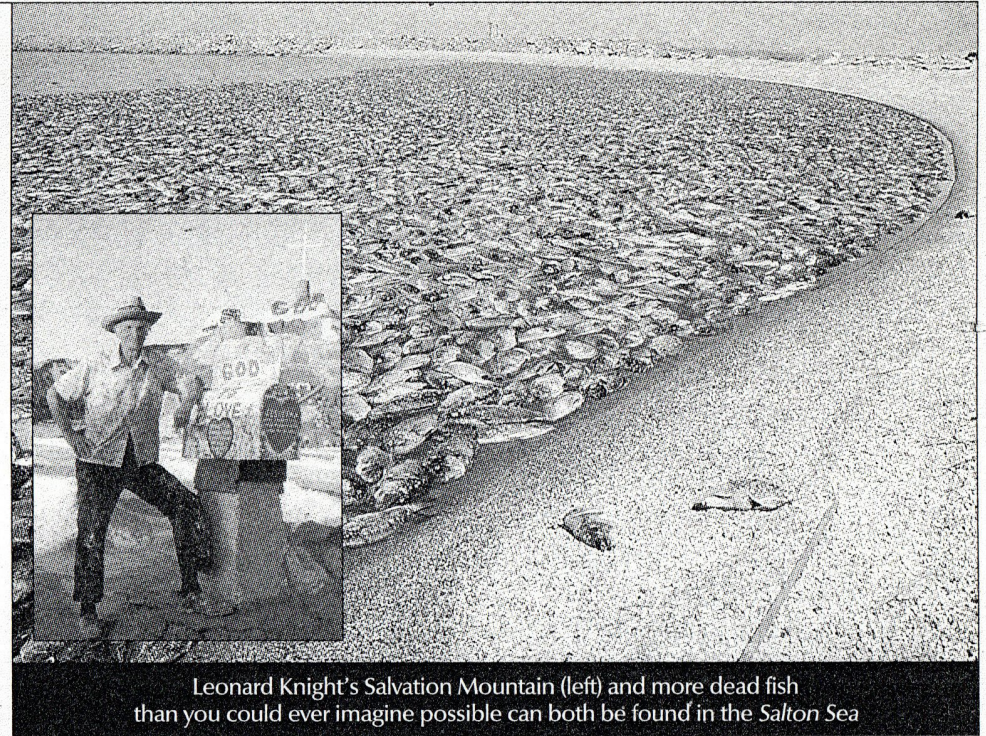
And indeed it was, with fish and seabirds a plenty; and, in California's post-WWII economic boom, the Salton Sea suddenly became an easy getaway for eager vacationers from nearby San Diego and Los Angeles. Marinas and restaurants flourished, waterskiing and swimmers abounded, the Beach Boys started playing, and all those land developers

started seeing even greater dollar signs on the horizon. So why isn't the Salton Sea as well known today as nearby ritzy Palm Springs?

Environmental disaster, that's why. As a closed ecosystem—the Salton Sea has no water naturally flowing in and out—a lack of natural predators meant the fish population grew exponentially; but a lack of flow meant the salinity continued to rise to terminal levels, killing off hundreds of millions of fish—7.6 million in a single day back in the 1970s. This, in turn, led to a "toxic margarita" of avian botulism when seabirds started eating the maggot-infested fish. Add to that more flooding from the Colorado River (which caused the sea's level to rise, washing out homes and resorts), a series of droughts (which caused the water to drop, leaving waterfront properties stranded far from shore) and the ever-present stink from ridiculously high levels of salt, dead fish and dead birds, and you've got what quirky narrator John Waters describes as a place where "utopia meets the apocalypse".

All of this is captured in Metzler and Springer's engaging, informative and surprisingly entertaining 73-minute film, narrated by John Waters, along with some of the weirdest real people ever seen on screen. There's the ex-Hungarian revolutionary, the Jesus freak who's building his own mountain, the leather-skinned pacifist nudist, the eccentric ladies of the Bombay Beach Women's Club and the Salton Sea's only celebrity hero, the late Sonny Bono.

In many ways, *Plagues & Pleasures* plays like a microcosm of the U.S. itself—yes, the land may have once been America the beau-



Leonard Knight's Salvation Mountain (left) and more dead fish than you could ever imagine possible can both be found in the Salton Sea

tiful, but greed and environmental neglect have caused it to fall into disarray. And despite the best efforts of Bono during his tenure in U.S. congress, the federal government did (and continues to do) nothing, and the ever-increasing water demands of L.A. and San Diego threaten the sea's survival today. Plus, the Salton Sea is one of southern California's only surviving wetlands, and its loss would have a serious impact on local seabird populations. There are also inescapable racial tensions among the few hundred residents left in the Sea's three communities, as well as a growing divide between the poor and the hoping-to-be-rich. Adherents to the

sustainability cause would do well to see this movie, as *Plagues & Pleasures* shows just how badly (and quickly) things can go wrong.

Plagues & Pleasures is one documentary well worth tracking down. If nothing else, it's the kind of film that leaves you with all sorts of questions, and with co-director Springer hopefully attending this week's screening at Movie Monday, for once you just might get some answers.

★★★★

(*Plagues & Pleasures of the Salton Sea* screens at 6:30 p.m. Monday, May 28 at Movie Monday. www.moviemonday.ca)

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