

Mid-Columbia news

Film turns eye to roots of Tri-Cities (w/video)

 [Watch the 'Arid Lands' trailer](#)

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By Annette Cary, Herald staff writer

Sometimes it takes an outsider to give us a fresh look at ourselves.

Tri-City-area residents will get that chance Saturday when documentary filmmakers show *Arid Lands* -- a feature-length film that tells the story of the changing environment and landscape of the Mid-Columbia from Native American homeland to plutonium factory to potential wine mecca.

"It's a hot, arid hostile landscape -- more like a biblical wilderness," historian Dave Arnold said in the film. "How do you reclaim wilderness? You baptize it with water from the river."

Arid Lands has been screened at several independent film festivals in recent months and won a stack of awards for environmental documentaries, but this is the first time it has been shown in the Mid-Columbia.

"I was interested in telling a story about how landscapes change and how people influence it," said Josh Wallaert, who co-directed the film with Grant Aaker.

Wallaert and Aaker spent the summer of 2005 living in the Tri-Cities and collecting stories of the way it has changed. They found it "lonesome and crowded," "subdivided and conquered," "overwatered and about to be paved under."

They also found it quickly began to feel surprisingly normal, Wallaert said.

They picked the Tri-Cities because of the Hanford nuclear reservation's reputation as the most contaminated place in the Western Hemisphere after more than 40 years of production of plutonium for the nation's nuclear weapons program.

But the first-time filmmakers also wanted the film to be a broader reflection of the changing American West.

Aaker, a medical student from Minnesota who previously worked for a New York City film company, is responsible for the look of the film, contrasting stark but beautiful images of desert expanses with new Tri-City subdivisions.

Wallaert, who grew up in Oregon, is the storyteller for the film, using his voice as a short-story writer to shape a narrative. Their goal was to make a film that defied stereotypes of nature and environmental documentaries as being "dry, dour, boring, narrated by a deadpan voice," he said.

The story is told without narration through interviews with area and other Washington residents with an interest in the Mid-Columbia or Hanford -- all with strong viewpoints.

The question they keep returning to is whether the Mid-Columbia is a wasteland.

"I don't know why people like to move to the desert and then turn them into the proverbial oasis," Richland activist Ginger Wireman said in the film as she showed off old-growth sage within Richland city limits.

Randy Crosby, a developer, boasted that he could walk into Richland city development offices without stopping at the reception desk.

"They are pro-growth," he said. "Basically this was a desert wasteland paying no taxes."

Kathryn Wheeler, who moved to Red Mountain for the privacy it afforded, worries about the development of ritzy wineries on the mountain and her voice drips with sarcasm as she talks about plans for horse-drawn carriage tours.

"As you can see my place here, I'm a peon, and those are rich people, and we are getting screwed," said her husband, Terry.

The story cannot be told without Hanford and its role in shaping the Mid-Columbia landscape.

There's the debate about the risk it poses. Tom Carpenter, of the Hanford watchdog the Government Accountability Project, said he wouldn't eat fish caught near Hanford.

But Ron Kathren, a professor emeritus of radiological health sciences at Washington State University Tri-Cities, said, "I'm a devout coward. I really am. If I felt there was a hazard living next to the Hanford site, believe me, I would not be living there."

The film also looks at how the close to \$2 billion spent annually on Hanford cleanup has shaped the economy of the Tri-Cities and pushed its development.

"Cleanup has been very, very good to Richland," Carpenter said.

Wages in Benton County are the third-highest in the state, topped only by King County, which is bolstered by Microsoft, and Snohomish County, which has Boeing, said Tri-City regional economist Dean Schau.

But take away Hanford and the average wage falls \$11,000 and Benton County wages begin to look like those of every other county in the state with an agricultural economy, he said.

Saturday, Mid-Columbia residents will be able to see the film as well as meet the two filmmakers and many of the people they interviewed.

The documentary may be purchased at www.sidelongfilms.com, with admission to the Saturday showing free for those who buy the DVD online by Thursday for \$27.95, including shipping.

Otherwise admission is \$6, or \$4 for Battelle Film Club members. Tickets may be bought in advance at www.sidelongfilms.com by clicking on "screenings."

Fast Facts

What: Mid-Columbia premiere of *Arid Lands*

When: 7 p.m. Saturday

Where: Battelle Auditorium, off Battelle Boulevard, Richland

Cost: \$6 or free with advance DVD purchase