

Wild & Scenic 2020 tour goes virtual

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Josh Miller



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Each year, the South Yuba River Citizens League hosts the flagship Wild & Scenic Film Festival in January, then takes the festival on a yearlong, nationwide tour. Due to COVID-19, Wild & Scenic has moved much of this year's tour online, offering attendees access to environmental education and entertainment while they stay at home.

The organization quickly adapted its outreach in response to COVID-19 by offering a free series of films, titled “Films for Social Distancing”, on its website. These films range from documentary pieces highlighting significant environmental issues to short, nature-themed stories made for children.

“We felt like this was an opportunity to give back to a community that has been very supportive of us, both locally and around the country through the tour program,” said Eric Dunn, communications and on tour event coordinator for Wild & Scenic.

“It seems like an obvious choice to try to provide new people with brief moments of respite from the barrage of news stories solely about or related to COVID,” said Dunn, adding that this appeared to be an opportune time to share the environmental messages contained in many of the films.

Film topics include climate change’s effects on the arctic as depicted in “Ghosts of the Arctic,” projects to reduce plastic pollution of waterways as chronicled in “Plastico,” and issues surrounding natural gas exploration as shown in “Water Warriors.”

In reference to the kid-friendly selection of stories also included in the series, Dunn said, “We know there are a lot of parents who are looking for kids’ activities right now, so we wanted to help with that while also sharing a good message.”

As the pandemic persisted and it became clearer that in-person screenings would not be possible, Wild & Scenic organizers began seeking solutions for reformatting the over 130 events planned to occur throughout the country from March into early summer – set to be its largest tour season yet.

Dunn explained that it was imperative to many of the host organizations for Wild & Scenic tour events not to cancel, because these events often serve as a high point in fundraising and gains in membership for the year.

PLANNING AHEAD

After trying out a number of existing online platforms, the organization decided against using any of them, opting instead to build one customized to the experience they wanted.

“The goal was to continue to offer a tool for all of these organizations to maintain their presence in their community after being forced to step back from that community through no choice of their own,” he said.


Some of the tour's host organizations, mainly environmentally oriented, turned their fundraising efforts toward new, timely causes in their commitment to remain connected to their community's needs during this crisis. For example, a Wild & Scenic event in Hoboken, New Jersey, was dedicated toward a relief fund for COVID-19 first responders in their area.

Wild & Scenic is now looking toward its fall and winter tour dates, evaluating each location on a case by case basis, but leaning toward the option of digital events for these as well.

"A lot of people are finding that, even if their local municipality is going to allow for events at that time, that doesn't mean it will be easy to get everyone out and comfortable with attending," Dunn explained.

He added that capacity restrictions may also affect whether it will be financially viable for many organizations to host the screenings in person, citing the cost of venues and technical crews as well as losses in revenue sources such as concessions sales.

"We just feel really lucky to be able to continue to bring this kind of programming throughout the country, and be able to help uplift other organizations who use this as a way to support their work in their communities," said Dunn.

More information, including the full schedule of tour dates, can be found at <http://www.wildandscenicfilmfestival.org/on-tour> .

Victoria Penate is a freelance writer for The Union.