

THOU SHALT OFFER SALT  
PHOTOGRAPHING A CHANGING SALTON SEA

by

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank committee chair David Rees for his guidance throughout the project, from conceptualizing the idea, to its execution and editing. Thank you to Brian Kratzer and Bill Allen who both have supported the project and lent their expertise in providing feedback along the way.

## DEDICATION

First I would like to thank my parents Marion and Roger, without whose love and support this project would not have been possible. For their provision of a place to stay, and the resources to enroll in the project hours. Also to my brother Rennick and sister Lauren, without whose encouragement helped me through the long days in the desert. To my good friend Kyle Ramer, who took my phone calls when the Border Patrol harassed me or when I found something new and interesting, who has supported me the whole time on this project. To Phil and Maureen Ramer, for their constant support and encouragement, and the use of their SUV while in the field.

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ABSTRACT

*Thou Shalt Offer Salt* is a photographic documentary of the Salton Sea in 2013 picturing the sea as it starts to shrink. Photography shows environmental concerns facing the Southern California man-made lake, including dropping water levels and pollution and resultant changes in population. Images shot in past years are displayed with current photography to show dropping water levels. This work establishes a benchmark for future photographic work as the Salton Sea continues to shrink. A photo book based on this work shares images with the photojournalism community and the general public.

SUMMARY OF PROFESSIONAL ANALYSIS

Two photographers who have photographed the Salton Sea were interviewed using semi-structured interviews. Gerd Ludwig is a photographer for *National Geographic Magazine*, and Jeff Frost is an art photographer and experimental artist. Using their interviews as a discussion, their photographic work in the region is compared and analyzed.

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## **Chapter One: Introduction**

I chose to do my professional graduate project on the Salton Sea because it is a bellwether of environmental changes and a visually beautiful place in Southern California. It has a myriad of issues facing it and will continue to be a place I photograph in the years to come. This graduate project serves as a “first chapter” in documenting the long-term demise of the Salton Sea. I have also photographed in the area for years, and am familiar with its quirks and geography. I have been able to scout out good places to photograph and get to know locals for access. I also had a place to stay overnight and knew that there would be fantastic opportunities for visual storytelling of the change going on in the area.

Photographing the Salton Sea fits my career goals as photojournalist because I am interested in documenting the environment, climate change, and the effects to people and places on the ground level. The Salton Sea is drying out and I was able to show this visually and get a snapshot of how the place looks at this point in time.

Photographing this project allowed me to research, plan, execute, edit, and publish a long-term photographic documentary piece from start to finish. It has made me aware of the complexity of such a project, and the discipline required to successfully execute such a project. Such an approach is needed when doing a photography project. I did my best to write a proposal and keep field notes and edit like I would if I were working for National Geographic Magazine.

Basically, the Salton Sea project was a dress-rehearsal for other documentary photography projects I will embark upon in the future, whether on my own independent basis or on a contract with a editorial organization.

My ultimate career goal is to photograph documentary projects about people and the environment that are important to me and economically sustainable via publishing or other method. The Salton Sea project is being printed into a book with a limited run, and so far I have been able to pre-sell numerous at close to cost.. I am also trying to sell the story to a magazine or newspaper, which is something I would do on any project. In this way it again is a dress rehearsal.

## **Chapter Two: Field Notes**

### **General Dates**

After project approval in December 2012 I started photographing over winter break when I drove back to California. I made three separate trips out the Salton Sea in December and January to photograph and scouted the area. I returned again for four days in March 2013 during Spring Break. I photographed the bulk of the project starting in late August through October, coinciding with cooler temperatures after the heat of summer. The field notes below are mostly reflections and raw quotes from when I was out photographing.

### **OVERVIEW**

#### **December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012:**

Driving back from Missouri to California and spent a day at the Salton Sea on the way back. Interstate 8 routing to Highway 111 brings access to Brawley and South end of the sea, coming in from Yuma. This allows convenient access to shoot the fields in the south end and Red Hill Marina, when it is normally a 1.5-2 hour drive from home base in La Quinta. This was shakedown cruise and the first photo trip in the area after having the project approved by the committee a few days before in Missouri.



First stop was the road between CA 86 and the South End of the Salton Sea (SEOTSS), a two lane 60 mph asphalt straightaway through identical farm fields in a flatness and haze of agricultural who-knows-what in the air. Along this route irrigation canals fed by the Coachella Canal line the road and the fields stretch on for miles. Along the road intersections errant palm trees sit as the road breaks to a flat landscape. I stopped to photograph a few along the ditches, because, to me, it symbolizes the agricultural areas and how visually simple they are.

First stop was the Wister Unit of the Imperial Wildlife Refuge, where the office was astoundingly open. I walked into the interpretive center and explained my project to the rangers there, and asked if I might be able to go in a boat sometime. They were unfriendly, rude, and unhelpful, which is surprising. I showed them work I had done before and explained my position, and they were too busy sitting around doing nothing. Oh well.

I left quickly and went to Redhill Marina, where I hadn't been in about a year. The water levels were even lower, and I climbed to the top of Redhill to photograph an overview landscape of the area. I think this will be a pivotal area to my story, to shoot from the air and ground at all times of the day to show the lowering of sea levels.

I stayed at Redhill and photographed until sunset, and drove through Bombay Beach to see what was new. Not much had changed there, but I did photograph dusk there. I ran into two people in a golf cart, and made their picture. The bearded man was named Buck Griffis, and his daughter Naomi was visiting. I

didn't get Naomi's last name, but I think she was unmarried so I'll assume it is Griffis. Buck has lived in Bombay Beach for decades, he said. This was one of my first interactions with residents, and he was very friendly. Hopefully some doors can be opened here.

After I photographed Griffis I made a straight shot back to Newport Beach to see how long it would take on a direct trip from Bombay Beach to Newport Beach, and it was about three hours.

I really liked the frame I shot with the two of them in their golf cart, but it was a bit grainy and blurry because the digital back on the Mamiya only goes to ISO 400 realistically,

### **December 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013:**

Show family North Shore Yacht club, Salton Sea State Park, and Bombay Beach/ Canoe rentals are being put into place, and allegedly somebody is building a fan boat to take people out onto the water.

### **January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013:**

Mecca Travel center, met man fasting for 40 days. Ski Inn Bombay Beach. I went to the Ski Inn to meet local people and to become friendly with the owners and bartenders, since in they are gate keepers in a way.

Guitar player in area for years

Janie trying to sell business

Bobby from Canada drinking other guitar player

"He's going to save the Salton Sea!"

Man lost son and wife, drunk down on luck

People riding bikes around Salvation Mountain at night

Its unusually cold in the Imperial Valley, even for January in the low desert. A new moon leaves the sky a wash of stars as the Milky Way rises above the horizon from the south. 9:30 pm and clouds move in, obscuring the view of the cosmos I had carefully planned and tripped out for. Such is nature, a subtle reminder of how little control man has over important matters. We can argue about whether photography is one of those issues.

### **January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013:**

Went to Mineral Spa Rd to photograph a man who is about to begin his 40-day fast and is setting up his RV on his friends land. Overall the photos weren't very strong because of the situation and the subject.

### **March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013**

Put together gear and prepped supplies for trip out to Salton Sea. Research and map locations to explore and generate ideas of additional contacts to meet. Drove out to La Quinta and set up shop for the day. Picked up 4WD SUV from family friends in area and filled up gas tank, picked up ice and water.

I have decided to focus on the Eastern portion of the Salton Sea Sunday and to make contact on the Western side Monday, when the Salton City Chamber of Commerce is open. There is no chamber of commerce in any of the towns on the Eastern side, so its beneficial to explore there. Also, the chances of people at Slab City willing to let me photograph are higher since it's a weekend.

**March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013:**

Load gear into SUV and head to Salton Sea.

Leave 11 AM for North Shore, Bombay Beach, and Niland/Slab City. Met Fred Garbutt, owner of the Banana Museum, a business recently opened in his family's old bar that has been owned since 1958. The family owns a strip of property adjacent to the Western side of Highway 111. There is also a liquor store and what was a bait shop. He hopes to continue improving the property and is paving the lot over in the next few weeks. I asked about the effectiveness of the Banana museum as a draw, and during the high season (October-April), he said business was good and drawing more people to the area. He hopes to continue restoring the property to its 1950's and 1960s state, keeping things retro where he can.

Fred Garbutt lives in La Quinta near the tennis stadium, but commutes to his business, and was very open and friendly to me taking photos, and asked me to like the Banana Museum Facebook page. This place is good for the overall story because it ties in with the weirdness that is the Salton Sea. In fact, NAME said the reason he put a Banana Museum there as a business development plan was to stay in line with

the kookiness of the area. He also mentioned that North Shore area residents liked his business, because they could get Banana Milkshakes. I tried one and can confirm they were good. Overall we spent about 30 minutes chatting and exchanged contact info as well.

I was also told that a pair of business partners are putting the finishing touches on a propeller driven fan boat much like those in the Florida Everglades, to start giving chartered tours down at the Salton Sea State Beach. This is good because I have had a difficult time obtaining marine access, AKA getting on a boat and getting onto the Salton Sea for varied shots. I would either have to rent a boat and trailer it 150 miles from the beach, or find a service like this, which has never really existed in the area for at least 30 years. Serendipitous.

This is in line with the 2010 restoration of the North Shore Yacht Club, a few miles South on Highway 111.

2 PM – Went to North Shore Yacht club, community center was closed for the day but checked out community bulletin board for upcoming events. Most event were outdated and will check again Tuesday to see if its been updated. Photographed the boards to keep track of important phone numbers, etc.

3 PM – Head south to Bombay Beach to continue developing contacts at the Ski Inn Bar that I met in January. Jane was there, and this time her husband Wendell were both in. There is now a “for sale” sign displayed at the front of the bar.

Slab City residents temporary that I spoke with, two gentlemen. Also the couple who were from Santa Cruz and who “winter” at Fountain of Youth Spa John was watching Salvation Mountain, there is a full time caretaker. Container Charlie passed away, East Jesus is now an art installation set up on his former property.

I was interested in continuing to photograph Charlie, saddened and surprised to hear that a potential subject passed away. It was a massive heart attack and he was barely 40. I wonder if this speaks to lack of medical care in the area, at least access to it. Voluntary isolation?

After sunset and dusk photograph at Slab City with long lens down into Imperial Valley. Head back to La Quinta arrive at 9 PM. Bring gear in, upload pictures, tag, archive, recharge batteries and re-organize equipment

### **March 25th, 2013:**

Make phone calls to CVWD, IID, and SS Chamber of Commerce. CVWD is Coachella Valley Water District, and IID is Imperial Irrigation District. Questions to answer , - who provides water and power to what areas in Riverside and Imperial Counties? The county line is just north of Bombay Beach, so there is a dual jurisdiction, so to speak at the Salton Sea that concerns the work I am doing. Water and power are closely intertwined as are city services, etc, eminent domain that affects residents.

10 AM – Reload gear into car and check to make sure everything is there and organized. Make sure all batteries are charged for both cameras. Etc.

Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge: <http://www.fws.gov/saltonsea/>

CVWD: <http://www.cvwd.org/>

85995 52nd Ave Coachella, CA 92236

(760) 398-2651

IID: <http://www.iid.com/>

333 E Barioni Blvd Imperial, CA 92251

(800) 303-7756

(Also have another office in Palm Desert, according to Phil Ramer)

The Imperial Dam north of Yuma, AZ, irrigates the Imperial Valley via the All American Canal. THIS IS AN IMPORTANT SHOT TO GET IF I HAVE TIME!!!!

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial\\_Dam](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Dam)

“About 90% of the volume of the Colorado River is diverted into the canals at this local.” RIVER IS ALMOST DRY BY THE TIME IT REACHES MEXIO. THIS IS LIKE THE NO AGUA NO VIDA PROJECT.....

All American Canal:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All-American\\_Canal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All-American_Canal)

“These canal systems irrigate up to 630,000 acres (250,000 ha) of good crop land and have made possible a greatly increased crop yield in this area, originally one of the driest on earth. It is the largest irrigation canal in the world,<sup>[1]</sup> carrying a

maximum of 26,155 cubic feet per second (740.6 m<sup>3</sup>/s). [Agricultural runoff](#) from the All American Canal drains into the [Salton Sea](#)."

LARGEST IRRIGATION CANAL IN THE WORLD.

With over 500 people having drowned in the canal since 1997, it has been called "the Most Dangerous Body of Water in the U.S."<sup>[2]</sup>

Drone should get an overhead shot of where the canal ends and irrigation starts, the juxtaposition between irrigated land and the desert.

The desert hides its secrets in plain sight.

Like the jackrabbit and coyote that inhabit this harsh landscape it takes a pause and a close gaze to see what's going on.

The highway and air condition won't do that for you. And we might miss what we've come to find.

In the mornings and evenings I liked to park down by the shore of the Salton Sea and in the bajadas and wander about.

Go to Salton City make contacts at Captain Jim's

Chamber of Commerce was closed will reopen at 2PM

Went to Norm Niver's house, talked with Norm for 1 hr about Salton Sea, made portraits, exchanged contact information

Went to Salton Sea Beach to take some photos of trailers, see updates, etc.



North Shore went to VFW Post I met Bob and other North Shore residents, allowed to camp on Bob's land near the Salton City Airport.

**March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013:**

Went back to Salton City chamber of commerce spoke with Rose, got maps, historical materials. Watched 1 hour film on history of the Salton Sea. Informative facts and figures. Also books that have been written, look into getting them.

**March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2013:**

Pack up gear, return to Orange County

**Sunday August 24, 2013:**

Departed Newport Beach late morning for Salton Sea, arrival 3 PM. Decided to go out for weekend due to monsoon summer rain conditions, hoping for good light. Overall there was some sun coming through the clouds that made for nice scenic images, otherwise it was a complete mess. Many areas were completely flooded and it was raining so hard that using a camera would have damaged it. I don't have a rain cover for the Mamiya and it's not worth the investment vs. how many days it actually rains out there. The hope was to get some dramatic monsoon clouds and make some landscapes amidst the trailers but it was just cloudy and completely rainy the entire time.

3 PM – Bombay Beach – Went to the Ski Inn bar to catch up with the owner, Janet. The bar is still for sale and filled with the usual mix of locals and passerby or curious folks. There are only 4 people at the bar since it's the middle of August and it's a dead time of year. However the summer rains have brought temperatures into the low 90s versus the 105+ degree heat normally found in the valley this time of year. On the way out observe that the Banana Museum is still open for business.

5 PM – Left the Ski Inn and backtracked north on Highway 111 to the Salton Sea State Park to photograph the nice light coming in of the west end of the sea, and frame it with park signage and a boat launch ramp. Also photographed the silhouette of a trailer park by the sea in the area. Also photographed the abandoned Café near the RV park, a well-known abandoned structure in the area.

7 PM – Sunset at the restored North Shore Yacht club, trying to improve a sunset shot I made in years past. The light was great and the sunlight was streaking through the clouds. On an otherwise overcast day I lucked out on this light.

Dusk – return to La Quinta for overnight. Many roads in area flooded, Highway 86 on western end of sea closed for a few hours due to rain.

### **Monday August 25 2013:**

AM – photograph flooded areas and clearing storm around Coachella and Thermal area, photograph flooding in valley area and Whitewater wash, which drains into the Salton Sea. The wash is surprisingly dry and didn't make for a strong

image. Light still mediocre and overcast, with many roads flooded. Decide pack it in and wait for better weather, leave area and arrive back in Newport 4 PM.

I've realized that a lot of the images are going to be more pictorial, landscape, and portrait due to the nature of the project. Following families around long-term isn't practical due to the time needed to establish a relationship and spend an extended amount of time with them. I am, however, able to get glimpses into their life when I am staying in the area.

I have been in contact with Jeff Frost, who is a photographic artist and one of the people that I have interviewed for the project. I am planning on having him join on some trips so that I have another person to drive and work with. The one issue I run into is fatigue, driving out there solo and running around and shooting gets pretty tiring.

On the drone front, I've suspended using any drones on the project due to cost. I applied to a scholarship and a grant and unfortunately neither of them came through, and the \$700 investment in the drone itself doesn't make sense without external funding. If I am able to find a decent deal used on the needed drone I might be able to make it work, but right now I want to focus on still images with gear that I already have.

**Thursday September 6 2013:**

Spoke with David about updating notes and creating a blog

Emailed Gerd Ludwig to try and set up an interview for professional component of the Salton Sea. He is open to meeting by his office in Los Angeles, it is a matter of scheduling and figuring out a time that works.

Updated Field Notes for August, organized existing interview with Jeff Frost and backed up existing photos, notes, and other data. Retrieve previous notes from external hard drive. Created blog for viewing online.

**Monday September 16 2013**

Left Orange County AM, headed directly to Salton Sea, west side. Scout out Desert Shores, Salton Sea Beach, and Salton City during day for locations to shoot in better light. Focus on Salton City and abandoned half-built homes, as well as signs for communities and canals that have dried out. Looking for signs of damage or cracks in the mud that are graphic as a result of the heavy monsoon rains three weekends ago.

Saw a sign at Salton Sea Beach that said Bingo [Thurs 10-2](#) at desert shores RV park? Check sign. Might be interesting to photograph a bingo event, especially since it's inside and potentially air conditioned when it is so hot out.

Found half-built homes that were stopped in 2008-2009 due to financial crisis. At that time there was a moderate housing boom in Salton City, a rebirth of sorts. Boom and bust cycle stopped a few under construction. Interesting that the recession is felt in a place like the Salton Sea, where its had recessions upon recessions.

Full moon rising in afternoon and at dusk. Temperature 106 degrees, making is more difficult to focus due to heat. Photograph until totally dark, blues in sky and lingering haze creating for nice afterglow. Went to Captain Jim's bar to see if there was anyone to photograph, two people inside so I did not engage. Found best route from home to Salton Sea Beach area, takes about 40-50 minutes depending on traffic and lights vs. the hour it used to take. Helpful for timing sunrises on early mornings so I am not sitting around in the dark.

Routing is Airport Blvd East, cross over Highway 111, and take ramp onto Highway 86 south, take to Mecca travel stop, and can either head down west side of the Sea on 86, or head East to Mecca and 111. This route avoids going through residential areas or down the congested stretch of highway 111. Another advantage is that the travel stop for gas, food, ice, and coffee is now at the beginning of routes to both sides of the Salton Sea. However must have cash or debit card since it is an Arco and does not accept credit cards.

**Tuesday September 17, 2013:**

Went to Salton Sea beach at 430 AM to photograph stars after the moon set at 330 AM and photograph into the 630 AM sunrise from the West side of the sea. Photographed abandoned motel and trailer with its side ripped off, as well as burnt out house on shore. I think I've photographed this area enough during the day and sunrises, better to focus on people or photographing at night in this area, or diversifying where I shoot, as in more remote areas.

After sunrise hiking back to my car I ran into recent transplant resident of Salton Sea Beach John Edmond at about 7 am walking his dogs on the ridge/dike that separates the dry part of Salton Sea Beach from the mud and recently dried mucky area that makes up the beach in the area.

I call this area between dry land and the actual water the "Salton Suck," because it is a muddy organic layer of decaying fish parts, clay like mud, and bones that literally suck your feet in. It's the consistency of peat or clay. Even wearing boots the mud will pull the boots right off your feet. Local rumor has it at an 18 wheel truck once sank into the Salton Sea shore in the area, after a trucker parked overnight too close to the mud.

Edmond was walking four different dogs, so we got to talking and he explained he rescues dogs and helps them find homes. There are stray dogs in the Salton City area, and I have seen them numerous times at gas stations.

An older, potentially retired man, Edmond said “People know that I love dogs when they find them they bring them to me.” Edmond has lived in Salton Sea Beach for the last year, making him the only older resident I can remember that has willingly moved to retire in Salton Sea Beach. He apparently has his own gated compound.

As we chatted Edmond elaborated on some of his neighbors, confirming suspicions that I’ve long had of the Salton Sea Beach community

“See that trailer coming in over there?” as he pointed west towards the mountains and trailers lining the coast. “It’s a drug den. People in and out all day buying drugs. I’ve called the police but they say they can’t do anything without catching them in the act.” (Written verbatim as he spoke).

Paraphrased immediately after: “Well I say how are you going to catch them when you are sitting around? The police just come through and drive around and leave. The tweakers just take the advantage of it.”

Edmond went on to elaborate that drug dealing and use occurred in the Salton Sea Beach area, but that due to apparent lack of police resources or apathy, nothing was being done about it. He painted the retired senior citizens in the area as victims of the growing population of “tweakers” taking advantage of lack of law enforcement and remoteness in the area. Edmond even claimed that they stole water bowls he placed outside for his dogs.

## **Reflection on Weekend:**

Despite the hot weather I was able to focus on the more populated western area of the Salton Sea and improve upon some photos I've made in years past. Now they are more current, done under the project, and in better light with better composition. Its difficult to find people out and about during the day, and it seems the best chance for interaction is during the early mornings and evenings when it isn't as hot. However, there are less people in the area, period.

I was able to find a better route from my parents' house out to the Salton Sea, making a long drive each way a bit easier. I learned that Salton Sea Beach is indeed awash in drug use and dealing, and that I need to be very careful there. For the time being I've suspended photographing in the area at night unless I am with someone else.

Overall, the images are looking like they will be more photographing what is there and decaying versus a narrative story of people in the area. Its hard to find consistency with the people who live there due to the periods of time between when I am returning to the Salton Sea.

In other news, I broke down and spent \$600 on a DJI Phantom Quad copter to use for drone footage at the Salton Sea. Unfortunately on its third test flight in Newport Beach it crash landed into pool and is most likely destroyed. There's a small chance I can get it fixed but the drone part is most certainly grounded now. I also have lost numerous field days because of the expense of the drone that would



have otherwise gone to the food and fuel budget. At least I tried. I simply don't have the time now between working and photographing to work on the drone part. I'd rather focus on core image making and the professional component than chasing around aerial footage.

**Monday Sept 22, 2013:**

Arrived in desert mid-afternoon and went straight to the Ski Inn bar in Bombay Beach since Steve was working that day and to get a pulse if anything new was going on. On way in I noticed a heavy US Border Patrol presence and asked about it at the Ski Inn. Boy did I open up a can of worms on that one.

Turns out most of the locals loathe the Border Patrol since most of them have been secondary searched and their cars searched head to toe without good probable cause on multiple occasion. According to my research, constitutional watchdog groups have declared that border areas, or within 100 miles of a border, are "Constitution free zones," and US federally funded police forces, armed with assault rifles and K-9 dogs, are conducting checkpoints and road stops 70 miles away from the US border, under the guise of border patrol. I have to go through these every time I go to the south end of the Salton Sea, since one is south of Bombay Beach on Highway 111, and another one south of Salton City near the intersection of Highway 86 and CA 78.

The problem the locals appear to have is the stopping and questioning, and the not-infrequent searching of their vehicles. They maintain that the Border Patrol should know they are locals from their frequency of passing through. A lot of patrons and bar employees have to drive through it every day to get to work. In short, the locals are very independent minded and live in the area because its open and there isn't that much interference from police. The Border Patrol is contrary to this, which is my theory on why people loathe their presence, for the most part. It's a bit out of the scope of the project, and is another project entirely on its own. I touch upon it because the locals talk about it a lot when the subject is broached, and I have to deal with the checkpoint as well every time I drive through.

Since I don't look like I'm from the area, and my car is always filled with various camera bags and a cooler, I am usually asked a few questions, where am I going, do I work there, etc, get my car looked in, and have the K-9 dog do a lap around my car. I don't have to answer these questions as an American citizen, but I do for speedy passage so I can focus on making pictures. Some stories I heard were from locals, another came from Steve, the bartender who I've become friends with at the Ski Inn.

I met Bobby and Helen at the ski inn, around 430pm. We talked for bit and I also photographed Bobby because he had an awesome beard. I asked if I could make his picture and here is this macho desert rat kind of man who starts grinning and chuckling like a little kid. It was a funny experience and made me remember that as intimidating as some of these desert type people may seem, they're all human on the

inside, and usually very friendly and welcoming.

When I talked to him about the Border Patrol, Bobby said “the little bastards. They hit you they hit you with everything they got,” when you get stopped or try to push back at all or ask questions.” Bobby also spoke about his knowledge on the Salton Sea and Its related literature, stating, “I doubt there's anything out there that I haven't read,” on the subject. He also mentioned the Niland tomato festival, which may or may not occur anymore. I’ve seen a Niland tomato festival ribbon in one of the caves at Leonard Knight’s Salvation Mountain.

Helen and Bobby, contact phone number, home [760 412 2431](tel:7604122431).

Bobby invited me to come to the bar and pool hall in Niland on Saturday nights. I haven’t been able to make it yet because of work, but hopefully when I get a Saturday free I can go check it out.

He was also in a music video “Somebody to die for,” for a band that is on YouTube. He appears for a few seconds halfway through. Left Ski Inn and went to Redhill Marina to shoot sunset, but decided to explore an area around the mouth of the New River. I knew there were some abandoned docks in the area but I’ve never been able to find them. I always thought they would make a surreal juxtaposition to the alien landscape. Lo and behold, they were only a few hundred feet from a road I’ve driven many times before, hidden behind some Tamarisk and Creosote trees. The light was gorgeous in the heat, and the hot weather allowed for the haze to turn to a bright orange and sunset hues as I shot the docks against the receding water and muck. There was a huge amount of algae and sludge, and parts of the muck

around the docks were a bright green, with bird footprints all over the place. The combination of decaying organic fish matter and bird guano allowed the algae to grow, I think.

I also found an abandoned water ski, which was really cool. Other than boats it's the first piece of evidence Vie encountered that proves people do actually use the Salton Sea for recreation. It was fiberglass and in decent shape, so it couldn't have been that old. I'd love to photograph the ski in the studio, but it was 6 feet long and I didn't have room in the car. Plus, I'd rather photograph the artifact in its natural setting rather than adulterate it, move it, and put it in a studio. It worked much better with the abandoned tires, shore, and trees.

Went to Redhill Marina to photograph the jetty at dusk, some thoughts that entered into my mind, "Echoes of the coyote bounce off canyon walls and the sun radiates off the desert floor in between the shadow of civilization and the end of the earth."

I made it to Redhill Marina at dusk and photographed sunset along the way. I took some low light shots of the camping area and picnic benches, and it got oddly hazy as I worked to photograph the openness of the area. Once completely dark set course back to La Quinta, made it through Border Patrol checkpoint after questioning, uploaded and edited images.

Went over directions with family friends who are letting borrow their 4x4 SUV when out in the desert. Its 10 years old and blends better with surroundings

than my Range Rover. It also puts less miles on my truck which is getting way too many put on, since I've exceeded the budgeted mileage for the project.

Accessing Ramer house to borrow truck: 1946 code, key is cup holder of the Touraeg, if its not there, you ended to get into the house, the keys to the house are near the workbench, and there is a vise on the corner, and behind that on the support post, there is a hook with the house keys on it.

The biggest one will get you into the house, the small one is for the casita. The big one, as soon as you open the door, the alarm pad is on the wall, and you'll press the "Off" button, and the code is 1946. In master bath, the key would be on the built in dresser in Phil's closet. When you go to leave, you'll press the button, ARM, 1946.

#### **Sunday October 6:**

Prep gear and pack for trip to Salton Sea, have to push departure back to AM due to spot fire news coverage I had to shoot in Orange County.

#### **Monday October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

Called Jackson Air flight services to schedule a charter flight Scott Moorehead with Jackson Flight Training in Thermal, CA. Can fly around the Salton Sea, call on cell 760 574 8513, had originally called the office line/

Drove to North Shore for the afternoon, weather was mid 90s, showing a cooling trend (finally) for the area.

## **International Banana Museum:**

First stop was the International Banana Museum, run by Fred Garbutt. Garbutt is a Coachella Valley area resident who normally refinishes tennis courts, but is trying to make the museum his full time business. So far he has been written up in various magazines and newspapers, and will be in a pilot for an A&E reality TV show on collectors.

I photographed Fred in the building and outside the sign, working for a bit on various angles, and I asked him to put on some of his favorite banana paraphernalia. The Banana museum fits perfectly into the Salton Seas weirdness. When discussing business prospects, where admission is \$1.00 if you don't buy a banana milkshake (\$3.50), Fred bluntly said: "As long as you come give me a dollar I don't give a fuck."

I cracked up at his suggestion and his candor about business there. It was said in jest since Fred is very laid back, but there was some seriousness to it as well. Fred wasn't afraid of being lampooned as a wacko on reality TV to further the business. In person he is level headed, well-spoken, and laid back.

My favorite props were a banana shaped record player, a banana suit, and a VW Beetle named the Banana Bug, in all yellow. The parking lot had been paved and it looked like Fred was trying to restore the area.

<http://gawker.com/5514809/meet-the-guy-and-his-mom-who-saved-the-international-banana-museum>

### **Ski Inn Bar, Bombay Beach:**

Next stop was the good old Ski Inn bar in Bombay Beach. This is always a great place to stop and have a Coke, or a beer at the end of the day. There's always different locals around telling stories and offering to help out with the project. Folks are friendly and down to earth, and aside from the regular town drunks, its pretty harmless.

This time I noticed dozens of feral cats in town, which come to the back of the kitchen at 7 pm, because Janie, the owner, feeds them. Nobody spays or neuters the cats in town, and residents estimate there are hundreds of the feral felines prancing around the area. Its probably some sort of public health hazard, or at least animal endangerment.

I got some great Border Patrol complaints as usual, and then asked one of the bar Patrons, Steve, a resident of Bashford's Mineral Spa, about photographing older and retired folks at the mineral spa. I really want a photo of "old white people" sun tanning at a pool in front of RVs in the middle of the desert. Gerd Ludwig has a hilarious shot of it, and in all honestly I want a similar one in the final project. Of course the photo will be my own creation and in a different location, but its an interesting angle.

Steve mentioned Craig Bashford was the owner of Bashford's mineral spa, and that I should ask him for permission to photograph. Got a phone number and

will call, phone number and contact info online, just Google "Bashford's Mineral Spa." Also the Lark spa, nearby had "nice people."

About Glamis North "That guy is (the owner) is a jerk." The Fountain of Youth Spa operators are "Nazis," and you cant get in there unless "you know someone" said Steve. Steve went on to talk about safety in Bombay Beach "Young ones are all thieves... third generation welfare" referring to the high poverty rate in the town. I also spoke with Buster, and Bombay Beach resident who had "been here since '65."

Buster said of Bombay, it "Used to be really bitchin' down here. IID shut down the marinas, cant launch nothing."

Photo notes for captions: Steve right, buster left. Ski inn. Candy was the bartender that day. She is married with kids and tries to keep them away from the drinking etc in Bombay Beach. They live outside of town. Candy is trying to become a nurse in Brawley and is working at the Ski Inn as a part time job.

Scuttlebutt overheard at the bar, not sure who it was about: "I heard Roger went and turned himself in." That's the bank robber 22 years. He's gonna land back in there of he don't cool it." Of somebody's kid living in Bombay Beach.

Ideas that popped into my head when sitting at the bar:

Juxtapose the following scenarios:

Salton sea vs. Hideaway golf course.

Hideaway houses vs. Salton sea houses

Hideaway opening gala vs. the range in slab city.



Stayed at Ski Inn until dark and photographed the sign at night. I was tired and didn't want to deal with the Border Patrol checkpoint so I returned to La Quinta after this and uploaded images for the night and revised field notes. Stopped in Coachella and Santa Rosa to photograph fields being irrigated at night, as well as a wide angle shot of date trees at night, which both turned out well. I will probably use a frame from each location in the final photo essay.

### **La Quinta, end of day:**

Edited images from days take. Idea for juxtaposing 3-4 diptychs, comparing the lush green resort communities of La Quinta with the Salton Sea, which have similar ideals in relaxation, golf, and palm trees, but showing how one is not like the other. For example, the Hideaway Golf Club in La Quinta has a golf course, so does Salton City. But one is irrigated, the other is dirt, but either way its still elderly Caucasian people hitting the links. Also compare live music at the Range in Slab City with the season opening night at the Hideaway, which is on CLUB CLOSED NEED TO FIND OUT WHICH DAY IT IS!

**Tuesday October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013**

**Field Schedule:**

Find Salton City Golf Course and photograph

Fly drone at south end of the Salton Sea, Redhill Marina

Try and make contact with Norm Niver

Morning, finish editing images from last night and plan day. Fill up car and get ice, sandwich from Subway. Will be out all day and heading back to Newport in the night, so will be a 14-hour day and must be prepared accordingly. Called back Jackson Flight Training, left a message with Scott to schedule a photo flight. Still haven't heard back by end of day.

Emailed Norm Niver to reschedule meeting, didn't work out, next weekend. His wife was tearing up his dock and I am trying to photograph that. Norm Niver's dock is a symbol of the Salton Sea's resilient residents, and even Norm's dock is now going, because there is no water around his dock anymore.

First order of business after prepping food, gear, and car was a test flight of the drone. After spending hours rebuilding the thing it STILL won't take off. I think one of the motors is broken because the controller works, etc. Right now it's been a waste of \$500 and hours and hours of time. A total boondoggle, and for the time being I am giving up and shooting stills, and aerial shots are going to come from a real aircraft. It's hard to try and be a drone operator when I'm also driving, taking

field notes, meeting people, and making pictures. So the drone will eventually be flown, but it may not be within the scope of this project anymore.

### **Salton City Golf Course:**

The Salton City Golf Course is on the map, but when I reached its location and hiked the majority of the perimeter, there is NOTHING left. Not even a golf club, bag, sign, or flags. There's literally just bare dirt hills and a few desolate palm trees. I have photos and video of that, and it was a weird experience to have it on the map but not have anything actually be there. So, the Salton City Golf Course was a failure, because it doesn't exist. But it was interesting to see and photograph what wasn't there.

Sat and had lunch in Salton City, topped off gas tank and decided to head to Redhill Marina via Westmoreland and south route, a 2 hour drive. Stopped and photographed some fields being irrigated during the drive. Photographed the closed and abandoned Tacos Jaliscos building on Highway 86 in downtown Westmoreland. Some gas stations, houses, and abandoned businesses. Not much there, not sure how safe the town is.

## **Redhill Marina and Sonny Bono Salton Sea Wildlife Refuge:**

When I got to Redhill Marina I noticed that the salt flat where you can really see the lowering of the sea levels appeared drier than before, and maybe it was safer to hike out to the dried out jetty and trees that were uncovered on open ground. There were multiple dead trees that birds used to nest, since there was shallow water around them, keeping Coyotes and other predators at bay. Now, the water receded, the trees are on open ground, and the birds have abandoned the nests. The trees sit as silent, eerily, dead sentinels to the dying and shrinking of the Salton Sea.

The hike was about a mile each way through the salt flat, and some places it was muddy so it took a while to get out there. I didn't make quite the frames I wanted so I'll have to go back and be more careful with a tripod, but I can go back out next weekend since I know its safe to walk out there.

The refuge boundary is very close to the trees so I need to be careful not to trespass into the wildlife refuge. I can see a shakedown and huge ticket if I cross the line. So far, I didn't even see anybody in the area, so I think I'm fine to go back out, and make some long exposures at night.

Unlike the famous three trees closer to dry land, the new trees have 7 intact abandoned nests and nobody else has photographed them close. There aren't even footprints around it, which stay in the salt for a long time. So, I think I will make some long night exposures after sunset this weekend.

Once it got almost dark I hiked back to the car, and happened upon some fisherman fishing at the New River, which is heavily polluted.

### **New River, dusk:**

First subject was Nick Longo, from Riverside. Goes fishing for catfish frequently into the area. He was wearing the white shirt and smoking a cigar, and he gave me one as a gift. Longo said, "My cousin used to dynamite fish and BOOM he (the Catfish) died right there." He used to go and fish and dynamite. Nick said of life and the Salton Sea, "20 years a lot of things change. I've been divorced at least 30."

Jerry Garza, fisherman in middle of group of three. "Everybody calls me the fisherman. But I want to catch a turtle" around the New River area.

Made frames of them fishing but light was almost non-existent and shot in low light handheld with 1.4 lenses almost in the dark. They had one lantern which I tried to use as a natural source of light, in that wherever they put it I tried to use the light it gave off to highlight the side of their face, or to get the silhouette on the other side.

Set course back to La Quinta, 80 miles away. Stopped to photograph a highway mileage sign, similar to the sign that was in the movie "Into The Wild" which had scenes film in the Southern Salton Sea/Niland area.

Border Patrol checkpoint typical police state activity, K-9 unit and vehicle inspection even though I am 70 miles away from the border. Its ridiculous but a story for another day.

**Friday October 11<sup>th</sup>:**

Conversation with Joel Prince, arrange interview. Follow up again with Jackson, left another message

**Sunday October 13<sup>th</sup>:**

Depart Newport 12 noon arrive in desert midday. Stop and load up food, water, supplies. Switch car to Touraeg 4x4 in Indian Wells.

Direct to North Shore to explore the keys area and houses on the coast. Sunday afternoon so families out at church and a dune buggy driving around. Lots of stares. Otherwise town is typical quiet, but because the weather is now getting cooler it appears more people are spending time outside. I might finally have a chance to engage more residents other than the bar or VFW post atmosphere, where I can be hard to move into making pictures elsewhere.

I explored the keys area of North Shore, where there are manmade canals and peninsulas where some houses are built. The main canal that goes to the ocean still has water flowing through it, although its greatly reduced from what it used to be. Some docks also are far above the water, and they are on still-inhabitant private property, so its difficult to get access.

Focused on photographing at the end of the main key, of some of the dying palm trees, docks, and signs in the area. I noticed a lot of Pelicans and other birds congregating in the area. There appeared to be an especially unusually high amount of Brown Pelicans flying around. There is a sign that says "end" where the road dead ends at the keys, I think I will use this shot from dusk as the closer in the final book. 8 p.m. return to La Quinta. Uploaded images, edited, backed up work.

#### **Monday October 14<sup>th</sup>:**

Jackson Air for the third time, no answer, left message. I might have to give up on the aerial photos as well, since the pilot isn't returning my calls. Why I have so much trouble getting into the air is frustrating. There is another airport for private aviation, Bermuda Dunes, but its 20 miles further north and I would have to spend double and get a 2-hour flight to get enough hang time over the Salton Sea. I have decided to go to Jackson Air in person, since Thermal Airport is 15 minutes away, and see if I can talk to them in person. My guess is that they are busy, and this might be a way to get the flight scheduled once and for all.

Reviewed components for overall project and began planning for how I am putting together the final project. Need to condense my field notes documents from each week into one main file so I can format into the second section component. Should email David or Martha about abundant physical evidence, are those my out takes, etc?

Arranged 5 p.m. interview with Joel Prince, the second photographer I am interviewing for the analysis component. I will be in the field at this point, so I will park in Salton City, etc., and record audio on my laptop while I talk with Joel on speaker phone.

Plan for day and load gear into car – final goal is re-photographing the trees out on the salt pan at Redhill Marina at dusk.

Called another flight service at Bermuda Dunes Airport. Flight is longer each way to Salton Sea but these people actually answer their phone and return calls, so I booked a flight with them. Departure is 630 AM Wednesday, which will give time to hit the sunrise around Salton City. Shots I want on this flight: North Shore keys, White Water River output, Bombay Beach, the must-have is Redhill Marina area and newly exposed salt pan. Perhaps shots of the agricultural fields, tops of date trees, overall sea shots, etc. Phone number is 760 360 7400. Pilot will be Doug. Be parked and unpacked from car by 6 AM.

Called OC Register editor to ask for permission to start late on Wednesday. Will be back in town by 12 noon. Called Craig Bashford and they still are planning



on opening Tuesday. On completion of call started to organize various loosely placed field notes into one master document, starting in November 2012, shortly before project approval. Due to seasons and field time I am keeping notes from this time period on, when I focused image making for the purposes of the project with the medium format camera, etc. Left to check out Bashford's Mineral Spa and the Fountain of Youth Spa south of Bombay beach.

Gave Fountain of Youth Spa a call, and found I could camp overnight for \$17, and have access to the mineral spas and pools that the permanent and seasonal residents stay in. This most likely is my ticket in to photograph in the area. Packed up car, loaded gear, and added a sleeping bag and extra food in case I decided to camp at Fountain of Youth.

Arrived at Fountain of Youth around 4:30 pm and checked in at the front gate. Set up camp and went to pool area. Light was good and there were a few people in the pool. I decided to work the area and talk to some of the folks and gauge their receptiveness to being photographed.

Met Donna Solem from Minnesota in the "lobster pot," or the hottest of the mineral spas that has a reddish hue. She is from a town north of Saint Paul. Solem has been coming here for almost 50 years. Parents came here before, when Fountain of Youth was much younger. Saw a sign for the American Legion chili cook off Bombay Beach during the first weekend of November.

Also met Bill and Sharon, Big Bear and Riverside residents, respectively, in the main pool of Fountain of Youth. Sharon did not want to be photographed but

was very polite about it, and it would have been a great picture. Cant win them all. Continued to photograph until dark.

Also went to explore the FOY golf course, but there way nobody on it. It would make an interesting and graphic image if there were people golfing. I think its too early in the winter season, but it is a frame I should make at some point down the line. Went back to FOY camping spot and set up camp, then went to photograph again at the pool at night.

I met Patrick, carnival ride truck driver from near Seattle who had driven in recently. He was born in the same hospital as me, Hoag Hospital in Newport Beach. His father used to work for Ford Aerospace. Small world. On homesteaders he used to see in Washington, "They'd come in with these big dreams and then next year they'd be gone."

Upload images, camp overnight at FOY Spa. Plan for 5 am wakeup to photograph abandoned trees down at Redhill marina and get unique light since I've always photographed them during sunsets.

## **Tuesday October 15<sup>th</sup>:**

5am wakeup break camp and drive down to Redhill Marina (30 min drive), and park car in pre scouted location. Gather gear and headlamp and hike out onto the salt flat. Wait until sunrise and photograph tree off tripod as the light changes. Looking to create an image for the cover of the eventual book product. Light was a

good glow on the horizon. Also helps me visualize what the light will be like photographing at dawn tomorrow morning. The flight leaves at 630 am so I hope the jacket I have will work OK.

Head back to La Quinta on the way stopped at Environmental Recovery Services on Highway 111 at Imperial/Riverside County Line. Somehow I have missed this spot in all the years of traveling in the area but it appears to be an abandoned boat launch and marina that is actually fenced off (gate was open), filled with at least half a dozen dilapidated boats. Would be good to come back at sunset but it depends on time out here, I want to get to sleep early tonight because there is another 5 am wakeup call tomorrow.

Had to reschedule 5 pm call again with Joel Prince because I called at the scheduled time and he did not answer his phone. Hopefully this can be done this week, so I can have a draft done in the next week of the analysis component. The goal, again, is to have a draft by November 1<sup>st</sup>. So far I am in good shape on the photography, and after getting the aerial images tomorrow on the flight I should be in good shape to have all the photos I need to keep working on the draft of the book.

### **Wednesday October 16<sup>th</sup>:**

5am, wakeup and drive to Bermuda Dunes Airport. Loaded up gear into plane with Doug the pilot, in a Cessna 172. Photographed during flight and wrote notes after.

The flight over the Salton Sea is very much what I was expecting, a good aerial view of areas on the ground that was necessary to fully tell the story of the area. At the south end near Redhill Marina you can really see where the sea has receded, and the jetty is at least a few hundred feet away from the water at this point. Surprising to me were the patterns and shadows that the light played on the hills and shore, even from an altitude of 500-1,000 feet, which was our altitude most of the flight.

I really began to appreciate how there are literally millions of birds flying around the sea and the shore. All along the shore, there were flocks of birds, brown pelicans and many other types I couldn't identify. It really shows how the Salton Sea is critical bird habitat. Being over the middle of the sea at 500 feet also gives you an appreciated of the size of the sea, and how much land will be exposed as it dries out. The effect will become more pronounced as time goes on, since the sea has a gentler slope closer to the center of the sea.

Overall, the shots from the air looking straight down created interesting patterns, and I think a few pages in the final book dedicated to this effect should be put in. It looks really beautiful and humanizes a place that has been talked down upon as a polluted wasteland.

The flight was a success and worth the \$230 cost, and I got more done in a two hour flight/one morning that I have with hours of screwing around trying to get a drone to fly with a GoPro. The image quality I was able to obtain with my D800

from the air is all I needed in a flight. Id love to go on a few more flights but frankly I've exhausted my budget for the project. If I really need to go back out, I can swing the gas money for two more days, but things like flying in planes, etc. are out of budget. I've reached the point where I feel like I have most of the images, and the intense editing needs to begin now.

I still need to follow up with Joel Prince, as we've been playing phone tag for three days now. I am also waiting to hear back from Gerd Ludwig, and honestly I might have to start thinking of a backup interview, since I've imposed a deadline of Nov. 1 on the project draft, and I want at least a full week to fully write and synthesize all of the interviews.

On another note, I incurred a \$350 repair bill essentially since the battery compartment of my Mamiya literally melted. The battery holder fell apart and apparently the problem is not uncommon. I had to order two new batteries and a charger to the tune of \$350 with shipping. Because of this, the drone debacle, and the cost of having to take a real flight, my budget, again, for the project is pretty much shot. Luckily this weekend I was able to get the images that I needed for most of the project.

Drove back to Newport and spent a few hours editing the images from the overview flight. Began organizing selects from each take for the whole project.

I would also like to go back a few years to older images that I have, so I can show a before and after for some frames in the project. This will show how the

water levels have dropped in certain areas. I will begin editing two edits, one of 40 images for the book, and then a smaller selection for 20 online.

I downloaded Blurb Book Smart and went to a seminar at ASMP/Canon in Los Angeles on making a photo book to get some inspiration a few weeks ago. Ill probably make a simple photo book, and that way I can give copies to the committee, etc.

The next steps this week are to finish my interviews and edit for the book and website. The goal by the weekend is have a rough edit for the committee to review.

#### **Thursday October 17<sup>th</sup>**

Called Gerd Ludwig's studio, since I found their number. I don't think they are in the office yet, and I didn't leave a message in case I seem pesky. Ill try calling again later today. Gerd has said in the past to give him a call. Finished editing flyover images in between Register shoots.

Need to organize files and back them all up in multiple places. On actual laptop (word files, edited photos), on external hard drive (all files), and the cloud (full resolution selects, word files).

Maybe go back and photograph Aqua at market in Bombay Beach, she has an interesting story. She just got out of the hospital after being treated for cancer and is now running the Bombay Market in Bombay Beach. She had family in the

documentary *Bombay Beach* and she mentioned one of them has since passed away in the last three years. She could probably be an entire story on her own.

**Friday October 18<sup>th</sup>:**

Organized photos from the project into folders based on theme and type. Made sure they were toned and properly tagged. This took most of the morning before my shift at the OC Register, but I was able to lay out a few photos for the book already. I think the title will be "Man Made Lake" or something to that effect.

The new Mamiya body arrived just in time, along with new batteries, since the old ones blew up. Total cost: \$3,500. After this weekend upcoming, travel to defend the project, and printing the Blurb Books, I am really over budget, so this will be the last shooting weekend.

**Saturday October 19<sup>th</sup>:**

Meet with Patrick Fallon in Los Angeles to solicit feedback on project so far. He has been following my project so far and I thought it would be good to have a peer review what I am working on. He liked the overall direction and consistency but mentioned some before and after shots from the same angle would be interesting. I was planning on heading out to the Salton Sea Sunday and Monday so this works out well. I will add his suggestion into my shooting plan.

## **Sunday October 20<sup>th</sup>:**

Backup computer, charge batteries, drive to desert in morning. Switch to truck in Indian Wells and head straight to Red Hill Marina with one stop for before and after shots.

Swung by the Fountain of Youth golf course to see if anybody was playing, it was totally empty unfortunately. I shot a few frames and a self-portrait as a memento of how weird it is out here. I've shot a few self portraits in these desolate places and plan on including them at the end of the notes as part of my evidence of work done, or whatever that part is called where we prove we worked.

I spent a few hours finding and going through my old archive of Salton Sea images, and selected three old scenes from 2007, all shot in April, to compare to now. The difference in sea levels are staggering taken from the same vantage point. For these three scenes I am doing a 2 page spread for each, with photos on opposing sides of before and after.

In the afternoon I was at Redhill Marina tracking down exactly where I shot before with the images off my laptop, doing my best to line up the time of day and angle. Since it was a different time of year and there was cloud cover, the light wasn't perfect but the message I am trying to convey is there.

I stayed at Red Hill until sunset, then in the dusk light I used the 600mm f4 I brought out to photograph Herons, Cranes, and other birds to show the Salton Sea wild life.



I also photographed some vantage points of Obsidian Butte, another landmark that shows the sea drying out.

On the way back I stopped at the “Boat Henge” that I had scouted out. The entrance gate was still open and the no trespassing sign was not readable, so legally I was OK being there until someone kicked me out (that’s never happened in the Salton Sea, nobody really cares).

I had about 45 minutes of Milky Way and starlight before the moonrise and photographed groups of abandoned boats on the shore of the Salton Sea. I thought it would look more surreal under the stars and convey the level of dereliction in this area, especially the speedboat named Godzilla. Weird stuff, very weird. Left Boat Henge and went back to La Quinta. Uploaded and backed up images, and edited late into the night.

### **Monday October 20<sup>th</sup>:**

Decided I have enough images from this trip and have to be back early for work Tuesday morning so it wasn’t worth shooting today. I worked in La Quinta to compile and expand field notes, organize gear, and work on getting my broken Mamiya body repaired. I also added the Boat Henge photos to the book layout, and made diptychs of the before and after shots from Red Hill from the day before.

I also finally arranged a meeting with Gerd Ludwig on November 1<sup>st</sup>. So, I am going to write most of my analysis without his interview, because I am familiar with a lot of what he will say, but want the actual quotes. I will interview Gerd and get that analysis piece finalized in the day or so after. Depart La Quinta in late afternoon after traffic dies down and return to Newport.

### **Chapter 3: Evaluation**

Overall I am proud of the photographic work I have completed and of the lessons I learned throughout the fieldwork. I am happy with the final work product of a printed book that others can enjoy and view, and for becoming a more efficient and disciplined photographer by undertaking extensive independent fieldwork.

I am pleased with the amount of images I produced and the consistency of the photographic style. In photography it is important to envision a final product that has a consistent visual and aesthetic appeal. Combining different formats, color images, and black and white images won't work. From the outset I photographed this project primarily with a digital medium format camera, for visual consistency and a large detailed look at a massive landscape. I did use some 35mm photos, especially for the images at night, because the fundamental technical capability is not yet available to shoot like that at night with medium format.

If I could improve the final work product it would be more intimate moments with the residents of the Salton Sea. Because a lot of the project was photographed during the off-season of the summer, there were fundamentally less people in the area and it was harder to engage people. However, since I will be photographing at the Salton Sea for years to come, I look forward to improving to this area and adding to my portfolio of the region.

In the learning department I've grown by leaps and bounds in my confidence and ability to execute a long-term documentary project from start to finish. I learned that it takes many steps to make a documentary vision a reality, and that it takes determination and discipline to go out and shoot each day, edit, archive, take notes, and do it all over again. I learned how to prepare exactly what I needed for fieldwork, from clothes to food to camera gear, to haul around what I needed and nothing superfluous. My camera bag lightened as the project went on.

I learned how to try and predict the best times of day for light, specific to a region and its topography. The best light wasn't always right at sunrise or sunset, but rather after dusk and before dawn, due to the atmospheric conditions of the area. I also learned that the stars at night in the area were incredible and shooting at night added another visual dimension to the project.

I also grew in my ability to engage strangers when I am nervous. It is never easy to approach someone you don't know, let alone point a camera at them. I learned to be relaxed and to talk to people in an informal matter, and be able to move to making pictures if they were comfortable with it. For the most part people were friendly and I had few access issues.

The most important lesson I learned while photographing the Salton Sea was persistence in photographing. Whether it be getting ahold of someone for an interview or getting the right frame in the right light, sometimes things aren't perfect the first time around, or the second, or the third. But by the time you feel the picture is right or you're able to schedule the interview, you know it's done right and thoroughly.

Case in point is the cover photo for the book. I went to the same spot at least five times in the last year, for 4 sunsets and 1 sunrise. The sunsets looked nice, but it lacked the glow I wanted. I finally got myself down there for sunrise, after camping closer the night before, and was able to nail the light and shot that I wanted. As Peter Turnley said, sometimes you have to "stick with it" to get the frame. Keep working the light or situation and don't give up. This is, far and away, my biggest takeaway from the project.

### **Lessons from Gerd Ludwig:**

After interviewing Gerd Ludwig in early November, I also realized a few important lessons about the Salton Sea project. First, Gerd was also frustrated by the difficulty in photographing people, in that you couldn't do "street photography" easily like in a city. Gerd said one had to "pinpoint" your locations at the Salton Sea rather than look around. I found this to be true as well, insofar as you needed to meet people and come back and structure photographing people, otherwise you

might not run into them, and end up not photographing many people. This is where research came in handy, and Gerd agreed that these kinds of stories need to be extensively researched.

As I continue to photograph in the future I will implement this strategy, specifically focusing on locations like Bombay Beach and the Fountain of Youth Spa to find and photograph people, where I know they will be present and open to being photographed. It is reassuring to know that Ludwig ran into the same issue that I did.

In my project proposal I talked about photographing people in a traditional documentary style, but due to the concerns Gerd Ludwig mentioned in his interview and what I also encountered on the difficulty of street photography, the end result became much more formal, colorful portraits. Rather than a narrative specific to someone's life I ended up making portraits of subjects where I met them or followed up with them, making do with the situation at hand. Here I learned to adapt to the circumstances of the project. Even though the situation was not conducive to the type of images I wanted to make, I was able to work around it and still photograph some people.

In the realm of project goals, my intention and ongoing goal with the project is to raise awareness of the Salton Sea, and to show what is going on there and to present the facts in a fair way, and let viewers make their own conclusions on the place. In my project proposal I talked about the "so what" of the Salton Sea project, and the "so what" is showing the environmental changes there and the impact it is

having on the people, landscape, and wildlife. This is something that I will continue to do for years to come.

The last change made to the project proposal was dropping video from the project. I hoped to do some multimedia with GoPro footage from the air, but since flying a drone was scuttled, so went the video. There is certainly video potential in the future for the Salton Sea, but for the purposes of this project it was eliminated along with the drone flying.

## **Chapter Four: Physical Evidence**

Please refer to the Media Folder folder and find enclosed the .PDF file *Thou Shalt Offer Salt: Dispatches From the Salton Sea* book for the final product of the project. Per discussion with committee chair David Rees the final book should be included as the Abundant Physical Evidence for the project.



## **Chapter 5: Analysis**

PHOTOGRAPHERS OF THE SALTON SEA:  
GERD LUDWIG, JEFF FROST, AND JOEL PRINCE

by

STUART PALLEY

David Rees, Project Chair,  
Brian Kratzer  
Bill Allen

PROFESSIONAL ANALYSIS

FALL 2013

Expected Graduation DECEMBER 2013

The Salton Sea is a region in Southern California that has captivated photographers for decades. The Salton Sea was formed in 1905 when water diverted from the Colorado River in Southern California burst its banks, filling in a low lying area in the Imperial Valley. The water stayed, and towns sprung up on the Salton Sea's shores. Floods in the 1980s devastated those towns, destroying the local economy of tourism and water sports. As time went on, irrigation runoff and rising salinity levels also killed off the abundant sport fishing in the Salton Sea, since there is no natural outlet. Ensuing algae blooms led to massive die offs of tilapia fish inhabiting the Salton Sea, creating a wasteland of dead fish and abandoned buildings amidst a backdrop of desert scenery.

Two photographers who have extensively photographed the Salton Sea stand out as examples. First is Gerd Ludwig, a photographer for National Geographic Magazine and noted environmental photographer. Second is Jeff Frost, an art photographer and experimental artist. Ludwig and Frost take distinctive approaches to photographing the Salton Sea, both in framing their work through their individual photographic styles. Ludwig takes a classic documentary approach, photographing the people, places, and moments of a region to give the viewer a broad overview of an area. This approach is consistent with the National Geographic Magazine style of story telling. Frost's work contrasts Ludwig's photography since it is abstract and experimental. Frost's photography is done at night and utilizes artificial lighting to complement the ambient light to achieve his desire look. These still frames are

combined into time lapse videos with audio added, creating an artistic, rather than documentary, statement.

Ludwig and Frost were interviewed in person in Southern California on separate occasions. The “so what” aspect or importance of Ludwig and Frost’s work lies in the environmental repercussions to the Southern California area that the Salton Sea poses. As the Salton Sea continues to shrink air quality will decrease in the area, and desert winds could blow toxic soil from the newly exposed lakebed to the Los Angeles basin, threatening health and quality of life. Historically dried out lakebeds have caused dust storms impacting human quality of life and health, as evidence by both Owens Lake in central California and the Aral Sea in Kazakhstan. The Salton Sea is moving down that path, and Ludwig’s documentation of the Salton Sea educates viewers on the subject, and gives a visual record as it changes. Frost creates art out of an environmental issue, which may also lead to awareness of the area for the general public.

Based in Los Angeles, Ludwig’s Salton Sea piece was published in *National Geographic Magazine* in 2005. Ludwig has photographed environmental issues involving the hand of man for decades. Ludwig has worked extensively in documenting the Ukrainian town of Chernobyl since the nuclear power plant melted in 1986. A recent project, *The Long Shadow Of Chernobyl*, was published on the iPad and principally financed with funds from a \$25,000 Kickstarter grant. Ludwig first became interested in the Salton Sea after *Men’s Health* magazine pitched a photo

essay on the *Salton Sea* to him. “I had no idea what the Salton Sea was” before the *Men’s Health* assignment. “After these five days (on assignment) I was hooked” on the Salton Sea. The Salton Sea lined up with the theme of Ludwig’s environmental work, prompting him to keep working.

Like other photographers in the area, Ludwig says that “In retrospect I have to admit that “ruin porn” is always somewhat attractive to photographers, and the Salton Sea is a lot of ruin porn, lets face it.”<sup>1</sup> “Ruin porn” is a phrase used by some photographers to describe photography of abandoned and broken down buildings and places, with the textures of rotting and decayed materials producing a distinct look to images. There are photographers who specialize in only photographing ruins. Both the abandoned buildings and broken down towns attracted Ludwig, and Frost as well.

Ludwig says of his approach to photographing the Salton Sea that “I did approach it, shooting for *Men’s Journal* at the time, and for German *Geo*, and for *National Geographic* from a very traditional documentary aspect.” Ludwig’s visual approach was set up similarly to stories he shot in the past where “a sense of place was very important... the strangeness of the place plays a role.” Similar stories Ludwig has photographed are his *Tasmania: Daily Life* essay and his *Chernobyl: Exclusion Zone* piece.<sup>2</sup> Like many *National Geographic* stories, the photographer needs to capture the essence of the place, and this often takes a broad overview. A

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<sup>1</sup> Gerd Ludwig interview

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gerdludwig.com/>

broad overview includes landscape setting shots, detail images, environmental portraits, and moments of cultural events that define a place. Ludwig was aware of this need from the beginning and shot the project accordingly. For example, the images on Ludwig's web portfolio of the Salton Sea include senior citizens at winter RV resorts, farm workers, youths socializing in bars at night, sunsets, and overview shots.<sup>1</sup>

"Basically the whole work that I did there encompassed both the lay of the land, the subjects, what the Salton Sea is dealing with, and the people that the sea attracts. And the use of the water was very important as well... it was an all encompassing story, really."

For the shot of farm workers, Ludwig had to scout locations and fields where people might be working, and then photograph at sunrise to get the light he wanted.<sup>2</sup> When he first got to the Salton Sea, Ludwig took stock of the situation to inform his visual approach to the project. "You look at all these aspects, and you ask the questions," and once a location is found, "I come repeatedly until I have the perfect shot with the morning light, the right light."

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<sup>1</sup> [www.gerdludwig.com](http://www.gerdludwig.com)

<sup>2</sup> Gerd Ludwig interview



*Farm workers in a field at dawn near the Salton Sea.<sup>1</sup>*

After reviewing his results with *National Geographic* photo editors, Ludwig also “tried to broaden the coverage” to show the greater region of the Imperial and Coachella Valleys. Perhaps one of the most interesting insights Ludwig had on the Salton Sea was his stated motivation to show the emotions he felt when creating his images.

“I try take images to show I was touched personally by a situation. My mantra is “a great photograph touches the soul and broadens the mind.” It is these two aspects that need to come together, the emotional and the way of expanding your horizon.”

Since Ludwig had a consistent approach and vision in his mind of the end

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<sup>1</sup> Gerd Ludwig, Salton Sea Photo

product, he was able to hone in on the images he wanted to make. Ludwig says, “Having been there (the Salton Sea) for an extended period of time you know the places to visit and what time of the day.” Visiting for this extended period of time, Ludwig estimates that “in total I’d say I probably spent about 5 months shooting it.”

Despite his experience and approach, Ludwig still faced difficulties in photographing people, and his experience and structured approach allowed him to adapt to the challenges.

“I actually found that there are not a lot of places where you would wander around and do street shooting, you know, [but] you couldn’t do much of street shooting. You had to really pinpoint your locations.”

Photographing a specific location required advanced planning and scouting, consistent with many other projects Ludwig had shot. There were not people milling about in the desert, so Ludwig found towns like Bombay Beach and the Fountain of Youth Spa where he could meet people and engage beforehand, and continued to follow up afterwards.

“Research is really essential. I find research is really important today to journalism and documentary photography. You don’t know ahead of time. You might walk by pictures that might be of great significance, but you don’t see them, because you don’t understand... I don’t believe in the fresh eye, because the fresh eye is just an excuse for being uninformed.”

“The heat was challenging. I’ve been shooting there at 120-plus degrees (Fahrenheit), I was out there all day.” This type of heat is taxing on the mind and

body, and is an added element to the difficulty of photographing at the Salton Sea combined with the remote location. Despite these challenges, Ludwig was able to produce a cover story for National Geographic, and create an substantive body of work he still adds to on occasion.

While Ludwig wanted to document environmental issues in a journalistic fashion, Frost's angle was mainly artistic. Jeff Frost is a photographer and artist based in Anaheim and Yucca Valley in Southern California. Frost's work is primarily art oriented and conceptual, comprised of still images taken at night, and composited into video for time lapses. His recent project, *Modern Ruin*, includes much footage from the Salton Sea, especially the south end near Red Hill Marina.





*The three trees Jeff Frost photographed at Red Hill Marina. Vimeo screen grab.*<sup>1</sup>

A rural Utah native, Frost has a strong interest in remote places and abandoned areas stemming from his childhood in Monticello, Utah. He credits this background with his initial interest in the Salton Sea. “I grew up camping and hiking and all that stuff... I sort of instinctively went out there. I’ve always like shooting abandoned buildings.”<sup>2</sup> Once Frost initially visited the Salton Sea, he was “hooked,” repeating the trip various times while using the area to develop his photographic style of time lapse shooting. Similarly, Ludwig was hooked after photographing for *Men’s Journal* on an assignment that was pitched to him. Neither of them sought the Salton Sea out on their own, but after being introduced to the region were compelled to return to photograph.

While Frost visited the Salton Sea many times to photograph, as an artist he did so without journalistic intent, using the experience and feeling of place around the Salton Sea to direct his work there. Frost said “When I would go out there I wouldn’t necessarily have a mission” while photographing at the Salton Sea, but it “sort of turned into something” when he compiled the time lapses into *Modern Ruin*. In contrast to Gerd Ludwig’s work, Frost discovered the Salton Sea and then continued to create his work in response to the experiences he had there rather than advanced planning. Frost expanded on his approach to photographing the Salton Sea by saying, “it was really an organic process on how all that came to be. It

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<sup>1</sup> Jeff Frost, *Modern Ruin: Black Home*, *Vimeo*

<sup>2</sup> Jeff Frost interview

wasn't like some sort of plan." As a seasoned documentary photographer Ludwig's approach was more structured than Frost's.

Like Ludwig, Frost shares a similar attraction to the Salton Sea that many photographers have expressed. "It's such a rich area for the aesthetic sensibilities that appeal to me." For example, there are three well-known abandoned trees<sup>1</sup> that are featured in *Flawed Symmetry of Prediction* and show up extensively in a Google search for "Salton Sea." Ludwig did not include photographs of the three trees in his final edit, but some of his published photos were taken near the site of the three trees.

Rather than have his final work published in an international magazine or a portfolio website Frost's work was published on Vimeo for anyone to see. Frost recently raised over \$25,000 for his next project, *Warpaint For Trees*, which he is beginning this winter. The positive reception and attention *Modern Ruin* received allowed Frost to garner support for his next project. Overall Frost's artistic work clearly contrast's Ludwig's journalistic approach, with Frost using the visual uniqueness of the area to look at the Salton Sea in an abstract way.

From Gerd Ludwig's traditional long form photographic work published in *National Geographic* to Jeff Frost's experimental art published online, two approaches are used to photograph the same story. The locales are similar, and in some cases identical, but the final product, publication, and goals of each

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<sup>1</sup> Frost, *Modern Ruin*

photographer are different. In both cases, Ludwig's work and Frost's work contribute to an understanding of the Salton Sea and the surrounding region.

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## **Appendix**

Stuart Palley

Professional Project Proposal, December 2012

Salton Sea

### **Introduction:**

I plan to do my graduate professional project on the Salton Sea, a manmade body of water in Southern California. I will photograph the Salton Sea over an extended period of time and document environmental changes as the sea dries out and the impact it has on specific local communities. The result will be a photo project and I will interview photographers for my professional analysis component.

The Salton Sea was created by accident at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when irrigation canals diverting the Colorado River for agricultural purposes burst their banks. The water flowed to the lowest point in the area for over a year unabated, which at that time was the dry ancient Lake Cahuilla. The area is more than 200 feet below sea level. Before the 1905 flood of the Colorado River that created the Salton Sea, the area was in competition with Death Valley for recognition as the lowest point in the United States. Ancient Lake Cahuilla is essentially a geographic bowl with no natural outlets such as streams or rivers that flow to the ocean, due to its extremely low elevation. The New River and Alamo River actually flow into the Salton Sea. The Salton Sea is approximately 30 miles tall, 15 miles wide, with

varying depth.<sup>1</sup> The Salton Sea is up to 52 feet deep, but on average is shallow and only 14 feet deep.<sup>2</sup> The northern end has steeper beaches than the south, so the most evident signs of drying out are on the south end. Total square mileage of water coverage is roughly 376 square miles.

Eventually the leak in the diverted Colorado River was plugged, but the Salton Sea remained. Today the sea is fed by runoff from agricultural fields that surround part of its perimeter, and runoff from the Alamo and New Rivers. The Salton Sea kept a relatively consistent shoreline over the decades, and by the 1950s and 1960s communities were established along its shores with names like Bombay Beach, North Shore, Desert Shores, and Salton City.” These were the postwar boom times, and real estate agents and land speculators sold hundreds of plots of land in Salton City, promising it as the “Salton Riviera” to eager people wanting a second home or investment property. Architect Albert Frey designed the Salton Bay Yacht club, and speedboat races were held on the Salton Sea. It was a popular stop with water skiers and bird watchers alike.

Lots had power and waterlines, paved streets, and street signs. Many lots were left empty, while other lots had trailers and homes built on them. The 1970s brought an economic recession and speculation declined, and in the 1980s, extra rain and runoff caused the Salton Sea to flood. Most towns were inundated. Bombay Beach and Desert Shores were nearly destroyed until an emergency dike was built.

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<sup>1</sup> Stringfellow

<sup>2</sup> Pacific Institute

This left half the homes on dry land, the other half separated in salty water by an earthen dike. By now the real estate speculations in places like Salton City were bygone, and concerns about the salinity of the water and polluted runoff from the New River (drains from Mexicali, Mexico), hampered interest in continuing to develop the area. By the 1990s all that was left around the Salton Sea were hardy souls still living in the area, migrant agricultural workers, abandoned homes and trailers, and rows of paved streets with empty lots.

Palm trees, synonymous with Southern California and the desert, withered and died where they were planted in the sand. Palm Trees of the kind that were planted are not native, and they didn't last long in the withering sun and 115-degree summer heat. The skeletal remains of palm trees against a stark blue sky, beige sand, and rusting aluminum trailers create a Martian landscape, at the very least. Add to this the buildings that flooded were crusted in salt crystals, giving a surreal look amidst the desert landscape.

There is no natural outlet to the Salton Sea and there are thousands of acres of agriculture in the Imperial and Coachella valleys surrounding the area. Runoff from these operations drain into the Salton Sea, along with excess fertilizer which contains nitrogen, phosphates, and heavy metals such as Selenium. These metals can accrue in the mud at the bottom of the Salton Sea. Over time the metals build up. "Several heavy metals and selenium were found at elevated levels within some

sediments."<sup>1</sup>

With high demand for water from municipalities like San Diego, some farmers have found it more profitable to sell their water to the cities under the table from the Imperial Irrigation District and let their fields go dry in the desert. The result is the agricultural runoff that sustained the Salton Sea began to level off, meaning the sea evaporated water faster than it received runoff. The net result was a reduction in the sea's shoreline, beginning in 2010 and accelerating from 2011-2012. I photographed a spot in 2007 that I returned to again in 2011, and compared the photos side by side. The sea is visually half a mile receded from the 2007 photograph. This has exposed a salty crust on the surface of the Salton Sea, replete with all the minerals and heavy metals from agricultural runoff.

The Imperial Valley is wide open and has few geographic features to prevent strong wind currents. There is no natural vegetation to keep the possibly contaminated soil from blowing away. The wind creates dust storms, kicking up clouds of dust unhealthy for humans to breathe. The Aral Sea in Kazakhstan was in a similar situation in the 1990s, and due to Communist mismanagement of irrigation practices, dried and sank to a salty crust. The net result was a biological and wildlife disaster, and huge increase in asthma amongst the population (Gerd Ludwig).

The Banning Pass<sup>2</sup> separates the Los Angeles Basin and Inland Empire from the Coachella and Imperial Valleys. Interstate 10 passes through Banning Pass and

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<sup>1</sup> *The Salton Sea*, Barnum, Elder, Stephens, and Friend.

<sup>2</sup> Alternatively known as the San Geronio Pass



the main Union Pacific double track line from Los Angeles to Forth Worth passes through as well. The rail and road follow the original Butterfield Stage route into Los Angeles, since the Banning Pass was the way to get from East to West. Today there are also thousands of windmills at the Banning Pass to generate wind power, due to the strong wind currents created by the desert's climate systems mixing with the semi-arid chaparral climate of the Inland Empire. Wind kicked up 60 miles south in the Salton Sea could potentially be filled with harmful particulates for humans to breath, and fairly easily picked up and blown towards Los Angeles. The Imperial Valley already has the highest rate of asthma amongst children.<sup>1</sup>

Since there is no natural outlet at the Salton Sea, it has steadily increased in salinity content, heavy metals from agricultural runoff, and other pollutants. The Salton Sea is at 45,000ppm of salinity, whereas the Pacific Ocean is only at 35,000. Every few years, millions of fish die off in the sea. There is also a human side to the Salton Sea, towns inhabited with trailers, those on the run from the law, those on welfare, and a few hardy "Desert Rats" who eschew regular societal integration. The water levels of the Salton Sea have been dropping, and this could be catastrophic because there are many heavy metals in muck at the bottom of the sea that if exposed to the high desert winds, could blow into dust storms and blow towards Los Angeles, causing similar health issues to those seen at the Aral Sea.

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<sup>1</sup> Stringfellow

## **Qualifications:**

My time in graduate school at the University of Missouri and internship this summer at the *Orange County Register* have reinforced experience to make me confident in completing the Salton Sea project. I have track record of producing quality results in a wide range of conditions under deadline. In Orange County in July 2012, I photographed a demonstration turned riot, transmitting from the field throughout the night. The internship was also unpaid and largely unsupervised, yet I was still able to turn over most of my portfolio. This resulted from significant self-discipline in seeking out feedback proactively from editors and photographers, as well as keeping motivated on mundane assignments. I also forced myself to shoot feature and push myself every day at the internship. This will be beneficial for the Salton Sea project because it is almost entirely dependent on my self-discipline and ability to photograph over an extended period of time in the middle of the desert.

Through working at College Photographer of the Year and Pictures of the Year International I have also shown that I can work independently on a schedule with tight deadlines and precision. My supervisors Rita Reed and Rick Shaw respectively can tell you I was able to get the work done.

Finally, the Salton Sea is near and dear to me. My family and I have gone to the desert and Palm Springs area every year when we are together, and I started my interest in photography by shooting at the Salton Sea. I have prepared for the Salton Sea for years. I first visited the area when I was 13, started photographing it at 17,

and have been going back multiple times per year ever since. I know the roads, place names, geography, climate, demographics, culture, and even some people still living there. I am intimately interested in the area's and Southern California's environmental well being.

Professionally for the Salton Sea Project and beyond, I do not want necessarily want to have a "job" in traditional employment term immediately after finishing, unless an opportunity to work at a great publication arises. For the short term I would like to be a freelance, independent photographer so I can work full-time on the Salton Sea professional project, as well as develop professional connections and continue working on my portfolio in the Los Angeles area. I have some standing offers to be a consistent freelancer for larger publications in the area, so that (probably) can pay the bills while I work on the Salton Sea project. This is a temporary arrangement, for about 6 months. I'll add in that in a year I would like to try and have a job at a larger metro daily newspaper or a weekly newspaper in a smaller, rural market. These are two disparate goals. The metro paper would be fun for career advancement, but a small town weekly is ripe for telling longer-term stories in an interesting area.

Five years after graduation, I would like to work for myself. I would like to generate enough revenue through commercial assignments, stock image sales, print sales, and investment income to be enough to allow me to live abroad and work on chosen stories. This might sound like an unrealistic pipe dream but I've been working towards this goal for some time, in order to make it financially feasible to

have such a “job.” My fallback plan, if it doesn’t work out, is to try and get hired as a staff photographer at a single large metro newspaper or become a freelancer at 5 or more publications for consistency.

As a high school student I photographed generally at the Salton Sea for a capstone senior English class on describing some aspect of Southern California through our chosen means. It was my first documentary photo project and through this experience I became familiar with the area’s geography and history. I also developed an appreciation for the logistical magnitude of taking on a longer-term project in the area.

In undergraduate at Southern Methodist University, I documented multiple environmental issues, ranging from EPA Superfund sites to natural disasters. I became well-versed in locating, assessing, and documenting a given situation in a timely manner, usually on my own. It taught me how to think on my feet, photograph in remote conditions, being self sufficient for food, water, and electricity. I also learned how to be careful in abandoned structures, compromised situations, both socially and environmentally, and how to not breathe in toxic fumes or chemicals.

For example, I spent a weekend in Picher, Oklahoma, and abandoned lead mining town that was closed by the EPA, and Grand Isle, Louisiana, 6 months after the BP Deep Horizon Oil Spill. I went to photograph both these areas because I am fascinated by environmental change, and conducted both projects on my own. Both involved extensive research, hundreds of miles of driving, and advance planning. I

learned many skills, such as information on places to stay, where to go, who to talk to, reading maps, getting prepared with the right clothes, developing a vision of the end result, etc., all took shape here. While the projects themselves may not have been successes, - I needed return visits to make them better pieces of work - it was the experience as a photographer and as a self-reliant journalist in the field.

Lead contamination is rampant in Picher, and I followed precautions I researched in advance about reducing my potential exposure to lead and other heavy metals from mining. At the Salton Sea, walking around the dried up areas of lakebed will require similar procedures to reduce my potential exposure to harmful organic and synthetic chemicals. I've also spoken with photographers who have had to protect themselves in similar situations with respirators, masks, or protective suits.

After graduating from Southern Methodist University in May of 2011 I spent a week in Northern Japan documenting the 10-week anniversary of the March 3, 2011 Tsunami and Earthquake that rocked Miyagi and Iwate Prefectures. I flew there by myself, traveled, drove, and photographed on my own most of the time as well in a country new to me. I drove on the left side of the road and learned some Japanese in the countryside, where most people don't speak any English. The relevance of this to my project is that I am able to adapt to various circumstances and still produce photographs, and push myself mentally and physically to achieve a desired result.

I own the photographic and technical equipment necessary to make the Salton Sea Project possible. I have high-resolution cameras for documentary work, the right lenses, etc. I have a 4-wd vehicle allowing me to get to the right spots, and an existing knowledge of the area I have access to a room in a home rent-free in the region for roughly the next year. My only overhead costs are those of gas, food, and other minor incidentals during the project, in addition to possible publishing costs of a Blurb book.

### **Journalism Specialty Area and Emphasis:**

The method to document this will be by taking photographs of given geographic areas over a selected time period, in addition to the residents of selected cities on the Salton Sea's shore. The photographs will be pictures of the physical sea to show receding water levels, as well as journalistic images of residents in towns around the sea. I will also conduct interviews with other photographers who have worked in the area for my professional analysis.

### **Project Dates:**

Scouting and research is already in progress for the Salton Sea Project, below are informal dates that act as guidelines for the work:

Start Date: ASAP after approval - most likely December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

End Date: November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2013.

**Work Schedule:**

The Salton Sea is beginning to dry out and photographing should start as early as possible. Also, the area is 115 degrees in the summer months so photography should start in the winter months and continue during this season. Tentative dates are December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013, to November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2013

November 22-23: Advance scouting, re-asses condition of sea, map areas to photograph in December, try to meet with established contacts

Dec 14-18 – Photographing at Salton Sea, continue establishing contacts and relationships

Dec 28-30 – Photographing at Salton Sea, begin expanding stories on contacts

Jan 2-Jan 20 – Photographing at Salton Sea, 18 days, 6 days/week

Feb 2013-April 2013 – Editing and analysis of ongoing work. Work on professional analysis component on Tuesday/Thursday in Missouri.

March 2013 – Week of Spring Break shoot in Salton sea for 4 days, take second week to photograph

May 10-28 - Photographing at Salton Sea, 18 days, 6 days/week (dependent on temperature and work schedule)

June, July, August – Off season for field work due to temperature. Perhaps one or two weekends photographing at night with long exposures.

September 2013-December 2013 – Continue photographing as needed to complete both hourly requirement and content where needed. Schedule defense during Fall semester of 2013 as soon as project is done to graduate in December 2013.

### **Work Description:**

Most of the data is field collection of images and presentation of the images in a photo story with possible multi-media. The physical location of the fieldwork will also be in Imperial and Riverside Counties, on the shore and in the region of the Salton Sea. It is a vast desert region in which to work and photograph, and therefore



it is helpful to focus on key areas to prevent from being overwhelmed in photographing, namely environmental changes and people living in the area. It is also necessary to have geographic precision in where I will conduct field-work, because I will be re-visiting the same spots over the 6 month+ project period to document a receding shore line. Additional fieldwork will be conducted in area towns and in the homes of residents while I photograph them from an editorial/journalistic standpoint.

It is also important to develop a strategy and procedure for fieldwork in the Salton Sea. The first issue is access to the Salton Sea. It is in a remote part of Southern California and is also in the low Colorado Desert near the US-Mexico border. This means that hundreds of miles of driving are required to get around, as well as difficult environmental conditions. In the summer the daytime temperatures are 110 degrees Fahrenheit or more, and in the winter, nights regularly hit freezing, even at sea level. From an access standpoint, this means I have to be prepared with proper outdoors gear for personal safety and survival, as well as considerations for supporting delicate camera equipment in a dusty environment. From this standpoint, access is much limited to where I can get to with my four wheel drive vehicle. I am lucky that I already own a car that can access these remote areas, in order to photograph them.

Hiking at times may also be required, to reach certain parts of the Salton Sea to photograph. Preliminary scouting trips reveal that the soil in the area is muddy and highly unstable to vehicles, so access will have to be re-thought out for

approaching certain areas. As far as observation strategies, I won't really be "observing" in the traditional field standpoint. I will be observing, but it will be through a camera and lens, and I will be recording my observations as a visual record with a digital image file. I will of course take field notes, since it's essential to keep records about when, where, who, what, why, and how the photograph came to be and its context of being made. I will be disciplined in creating a digital data base on a hard drive that contains photos that have been recorded in a specific geographic location with location embedded in the Metadata. For photographs I make of people, I will also have an annotation for the file with the person's first and last name, date, and any information from talking to them.

For my photographing, which is the essential data collection, I would like to focus on the before and after of specific geographic spots to show the dropping water levels. I will also focus on the relationship between man and environment in the area, photographing the abandoned towns and the residents still holding on to show the disastrous effects of a highly polluted body of water. By photographing these two specific areas, I will be able to show the physical changes in the dropping water levels, and compare and contrast them to the effect it has on residents of the area.

To improve the validity of the project, it is important to have controls in place that will allow me to create work in a valuable way. First, I will seek out a mentor to review images and strategy with. This will most likely be a documentary photographer in the Los Angeles area. Essentially, it will be a real time peer review

of my photographs as I engage in the fieldwork of making pictures, I will receive feedback on accuracy of context, artistic approach, etc. I also am in contact with the University of Redlands, which has conducted a geology and mapping project on the Salton Sea, and they have agreed to help me with raw map data, etc. The secondary component to improving the validity of the project is extended fieldwork.

After I create a present image of the state of the Salton Sea, my documenting and interest in the area will still be present. Because of this, I plan to conduct periodic photographic fieldwork at the Salton Sea for years, if not decades to come. It is three hours from my hometown of Newport Beach, so I have the ability to consistently visit the area. I also made contacts in the area that are willing to be “guides” or “fixers” to show me interesting areas, or introduce me to people that can help with the project. I know the geography, land, and culture in the area. I’ve been going to the desert since I was a child and know both its stark, barren beauty and its temperature extremes.

With these extremes, logistical complexity, magnitude, and remoteness, come a reward of a Martian-like photographic landscape and a relatively under-photographed story. Yes, many news outlets and photographers have covered the Salton Sea and work has been published, but my approach will be unique with my own photographic style, and also in its timeliness in regards to receding sea levels in 2012. My long familiarity with the area and amount of time and resources I can invest into the project will also give me unique access and insight into the towns and people around the Salton Sea. I have even researched a helicopter charter from

Thermal Airport 30 miles away, to photograph the Salton Sea from the air at dawn, to show how the water has receded. I am also considering renting a trailer in the town of Bombay Beach for a few weeks to live amongst the good folks of that town, and get to know them, document their lives, and tell their story.

I will also be freelancing as a photographer in the Southern California area to help “pay the bills” (on days I am not doing field work) and I have developed a relationship with *The Orange County Register* to freelance for them when I am back. Further, should the time commitment of fieldwork not be sufficient enough to cover the 400 hours of project time, I have an offer on the table for a 6-month professional experience with the *Register* from May 2013-November 2013 that is paid (and potentially would include me working on my project, and potentially receiving feedback from their editors, writers, and being published with them). I will probably end up freelancing for other newspapers and clients as time and opportunity permit.

### **Potential Issues:**

The main challenges I expect in the course of conducting my photography project at the Salton Sea are ones of harsh environment, vast geographic scope, time demands, and cost. The desert environment means that photographing there from May to September are all but impossible, due to the extreme heat and the effects of heat stroke on the human body. Therefore, I am limited to 8 months a year when

fieldwork is reasonable, much of the time when I am in another state, Missouri. However, the Salton Sea is an hour away from my parent's second home, and I can use it as a base for my project when I visit for holidays, break, etc. I also plan to spend a winter in the area to conduct the project.

The size of the area means transportation will take time, and with it, cost for fuel. I plan on applying for grants and scholarships to help make it more possible. I am also considering working part time in the area. It takes 5-6 hours to circumnavigate the Salton Sea via roads and highways, so I have to take into account the sheer amount of time to adequately document the area. I must be cognizant of the fact that extended fieldwork may be required to increase validity of my photographic research. Overall, though, I have spent a good deal of time familiarizing myself with the region over the last few years. I am confident I can overcome these challenges to create a compelling and solid body of photographic work.

### **Dissemination of Work:**

The final goal of all this photographing and fieldwork is to raise awareness of the Salton Sea and its potential to wreak environmental havoc on Southern California. I plan to self-publish a Blurb photography book with images from the project. I also plan to include some writing about the experience and a brief history and analysis of the area from my point of view to provide context to the images.

The other way I would like to disseminate work is by publishing images and text from the project in a magazine or newspaper with a large, relevant, audience. I am drafting a proposal to the *Orange County Register* to publish my project's photos once it is complete. The paper wants to include more watchdog and in depth stories on the region, and the Salton Sea work will dovetail nicely with those goals. I plan on meeting with editors at the paper over Thanksgiving Break. Other options are pitching the project further down the road to the *Los Angeles Times*, *National Geographic*, *Wired Magazine*, etc.

The "so what" of the project is somewhat ironic. The Salton Sea is a manmade folly as a result of manipulating the Colorado River, and eventually nature will return the land to its former state. It has been around for 100 years, but it may not be around 100 more. The area, however, has become an important stop for many species of birds that use the area to rest during seasonal migrations. This is because many coastal wetland areas in California have been developed. The Salton Sea is known as the "Pacific Flyway" and its drying out could be a disaster for dozens of bird populations. The other issue is health impacts on the region, should the sea continue to dry out like the Aral Sea.

**Provision of Abundant Physical Evidence:**

A published book and an extended written editorial will be the first piece of physical evidence. This will show the amount of time invested in the project and the depth of research, correlating with field notes.

Additionally, most takes and images from the project will be published on a DVD in a reduced size .jpeg file format to be provided in addition to the completed project on an additional DVD. There will most likely be thousands of images with dates, etc., in the Metadata to show that I was photographing during given dates. I will also be taking copious field notes both on photographic and non-photographic days that will document the work done every day on the project.

Notes of edits, drafts, and potential interview transcripts will be provided as digital files. Receipts for travel, miles drive, and other tangible items showing work done will be provided. If warranted, I will try to make blog posts on my website to measure progress as I go along.

**Project Supervision:**

The supervision of the project will occur one of two ways. The first is supervision will be via an editor and/or a photographer from the *Orange County Register* should I concurrently freelance for the paper while working on the project. Based on established relationships at the paper and a previous internship there,

there is a photographer and editor willing to help. Should I pursue the 6-month apprenticeship at the paper, then the supervision will definitely be directly through the Register as part of my professional project working with the paper. An editor and a photographer help mentor me through the project.

Local supervision will be provided by providing direct editing feedback on the images as the project goes along. The project supervisor will also help me keep the photographs focused and on track. They will make sure I am photographing consistently enough to provide abundant physical evidence, as well as make sure I am keeping proper logs and adequate field notes. The supervision will be provided via scheduled meetings throughout the course of the project.

To communicate with the graduate committee I will be posting photographs to a blog over the course of the project. The photographs will vary in content and posting size, but will usually be anywhere from 1-10 photographs. The images may have captions or toning, but will serve as a visual “diary” for the ongoing work there, and to provide a way to solicit feedback from the graduate committee. In some cases summaries will be included with the images as well. The blog will be on a Word Press base, with a website address yet to be determined. The blog may be private, to prevent premature publication of images. In this case a password will be provided to access images.

Each time I photograph in the area I will also take field notes detailing where I photographed, the subject photographed, times of day, etc. This will serve as useful information for compiling the final project, both for image captions, summaries, and



abundance of physical evidence. These field notes can be posted to the blog in text form, or emailed as word documents or text directly in emails to the committee. The frequency of field notes will be consistent with dates of the project, and be sent during dates in the field, and during editing and follow up work. Since the project lasts longer than 16 weeks, the field notes will be more spread out in line with the duration of the project.

## **Theoretical Framework for Professional Project**

**Question: How do photographers or photojournalists construct an image of the Salton Sea through their photography and writing?**

Framing and agenda-setting theories help to answer the question above. One can apply framing and agenda-setting to interviewing existing professional photographers and their work on the Salton Sea. The scope of work will be limited mainly to photographers who have documented the Salton Sea in contemporary times, generally after World War II. Generally it is environmental photography that will portray an aspect of climate change in the Salton Sea or the impact it has on local residents. Environment is defined as the natural state of the area photographed, and how that natural state has been altered or is in the process of being altered.

The interviews will be useful to working journalists because it will make clear the framing and agenda setting that occurs whenever a photographer (or journalist in general), documents environmental change for a given project, and also provide context for images made. In this case the specific example is the Salton Sea in Southern California. The end work of images are framed well in advance of their literal framing in the viewfinder, and the theoretical considerations for such framing are explained below. Also, showing how agenda setting applies to documenting environmental change or a geographic place can make journalists more aware of

their own agendas and bias in their work. By increasing awareness amongst journalists of agenda setting and framing in photojournalism, it can help increase the neutrality and balanced approach to a particular story.

Various professional and academic sources will be looked at to define the theories examined and combined to effectively interview photographers that give working journalists an idea of how those theories apply to photographers. Both framing theory and agenda setting theory are relevant because photographers are constantly encountering both theories knowingly or unconsciously, when documenting environmental change or in the course of other work. Photographers frame an issue in their mind by their own cognition, considerations, and values, and engage in agenda setting by photographing work in a certain way to achieve a goal (i.e. raise awareness about climate change, influence public policy and opinion).

### **Framing Theory:**

Framing theory is a popular theory in which to do research and especially so for applications in the media. In photojournalism, framing both literally and theoretically is an important aspect to creating a framework in which to answer the question proposed. Framing theory has been defined as "an issue [that] can be viewed from a variety of perspectives and be construed as having implications for multiples values or considerations" (Chong and Druckman). That is, framing theory allows for an issue to be seen from multiple viewpoints and those different views

derive from differing values and agendas that an individual might hold. "Framing involves a communication source presenting and defining an issue" (de Vreese, 2005, 51). In this case the photographer is the communication source, and the photographer presents and defines the issue of environmental change by showing photography documenting that change. de Vreese cites Gitlin (1980, p.7 ) defining frames as "persistent patterns of cognition, interoperation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis monad exclusion by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse" (de Vreese, 53). Also, Framing theory is applicable both on the individual and organizational level, but for the purposes of answering the question, framing theory will be applied to the individual photographer in the course of their work.

Additionally, framing can "refer to the process by which people develop a particular conceptualization of an issue or reorient their thinking about an issue" (Chong and Druckman). Photographers utilize framing theory when creating work having to do with environmental change, usually before the photographing happens. A photographer will conceptualize the issue at hand, say pollution of a river, and then create and visualize an image based on their considerations and values. This process is the heart of framing theory, and the result of a photographer's theoretical framing can greatly impact how environmental change is documented.

"Research on framing is characterized by theoretical and empirical vagueness" (Scheufele). Scheufele asserts that due to the widespread use of framing theory across an array of disciplines, there is not a uniform "theoretical model" that connects framing research. There is difficulty in analyzing the application of framing

theory across multiple disciplines, and Scheufele examines the various approaches to framing, and the consideration of those approaches is useful for answering the professional question. Scheufele identifies four key processes, "frame building, frame setting, individual level processes of framing, and a feedback loop from audiences to journalists" (Scheufele). For the purposes of the discussion individual level processes of framing are most applicable. This is a key distinction "because frames have to be considered schemes for both presenting and comprehending news.... media frames and individual frames" can be separately identified" (Scheufele 104). The presentation of media frames is derived from individual level processes of framing and in this case the importance is for presenting news. The discussion is concerned with the framing and presentation of photography documenting environmental change and how an individual photographer is framing the work.

This media frame has been identified as "a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events... The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue" (Gamson and Modigliani 1987. p. 143). This is important for photographers documenting environmental change because "media frames also serve as working routines for journalists that allow the journalists to quickly identify and classify information" (Scheufele 106). Scheufele is saying that a framework allows a working journalist to more quickly interpret information under a deadline and create a product by that deadline.

## **Agenda Setting Theory:**

In the course of identifying and classifying information, agenda setting theory also comes into play, and in some cases, overlaps with framing theory. "Not only are agenda setting and framing effects related framing is, in fact, an extension of agenda setting" (Scheufele 103). For photographer's portrayal of the Salton Sea, agenda setting theory is especially relevant because photographers admittedly have an agenda to improve conditions in the area through showing their work on environmental change. Therefore, looking at the definition and scholarship behind agenda setting theory can be helpful in answering the research question.

To define agenda setting, "Agenda setting is a theory about the transfer of salience from the mass media's pictures of the world to those in our heads" (McCombs and Ghanem 67). Ideas that are prominent visual elements in the work of photojournalists also are important to what the audience is seeing. It is argued that the media's agenda "sets the public's agenda" (McCombs and Ghanem 68). In these cases agenda setting theory has been applied to issues of public importance, also known as the public agenda. Therefore it is appropriate that agenda setting theory be applied to a qualitative analysis of photographers' and media coverage of the Salton Sea to date.

Again, the agenda setting that occurs when photographer creates images and when a consumer looks at the image has an overlap with framing, and in the case of the professional analysis go hand in hand. "Framing is the construction of an agenda

with a restricted number of thematically related attributes in order to create a coherent picture of a particular object" (McCombs and Ghanem 70) For example, a photographer sets an agenda when deciding to photograph climate change, and hopes to influence the public opinion of that change by portraying changes in a negative light or bringing issues to surface. Once the agenda is set, framing occurs when the photographer decides how to photograph, package, and deliver those images to the public in a way that complements the agenda they have set. "Agenda setting also suggests a criterion or deciding specific frames to study" (McCombs and Ghanem 70).

## Professional Project Method and Literature Review:

In order to answer the question of “How do photographers or photojournalists construct an image of the Salton Sea through their photography and writing?” interviewing photographers about their documentary work on the Salton Sea is the best approach. Various photographers’ work will be discussed and compared to see what kind of agenda-setting and framing occurs. From these interview transcripts an image can be constructed of who, what, why, and how the Salton Sea has been portrayed by contemporary photographers. Additional photographers’ work will possibly be included to place the Salton Sea in context of overall photographic coverage of climate change from other geographic areas.

The photographers I will interview have either published formal books in print, or published their work in a magazine, like Gerd Ludwig in *National Geographic*, or in an online exhibit or personal essay on their website. While the publication methods are varied, the content is still consistent in that they are photographs documenting some aspect of the Salton Sea and surrounding region. The photographers interviewed have work that is non-scholarly and intended for media market use. There is research in some of the books like *Salt Dreams* and *In Search of Eldorado*, but it is limited to the written components giving a history and analysis of the area, not photographs.

The three photographers I have selected to initially interview are Gerd Ludwig, Jeff Frost, and Troy Paiva. The three photographers have photographed the



area in diverse ways and over different time periods. Their work is well known on the area and they all live in California. Gerd is from Los Angeles and Jeff lives in Orange County. Troy lives in California as well, so it is possible to get interviews in person.

Fortunately the photographers' are based in the Southern California area, and access to them for interviews is simplified. However, it should be emphasized that many are working professionals with busy schedules, and there is no guarantee of an interview, and I have a backup professional approach if this occurs. I will contact area photographers to schedule interviews. Selected transcripts from those conversations will be included when discussing their work.

Questions will be formatted in a semi-structured, open-ended manner (Bernard, 1988). The interviews will be relatively informal and conducted at a coffee shop, restaurant, on location, or other neutral, relaxing spot. There will be consistent questions across the board to those interviewed, but if a photographer engages a certain response and elaborates, I will let them continue before going on. Questions may change as well depending on the interview. If possible photographers will also be combined as a group, to see if different responses will occur.

Specific questions I hope to answer through the analysis of photographers' work<sup>1</sup> are:

- What was the photographer intending to do with their work?
- Does the photographer have a specific or stated agenda in mind, when creating or publishing the work?
- Does the photographer have a specific point of view that they frame the photographs in<sup>2</sup>?
- Is there a specific narrative or story the photographer wants to tell, i.e. a specific family living at the Salton Sea or the region in general?
- How did the photographer go about telling their story, and over what period of time?
- What technical approach did the photographer use, did they shoot film or digital, is the work color or black and white?
- Is it a newspaper photojournalistic approach or more of a fine art documentary work?

When discussing photographers' interviews it is also important to frame their work in context of who the photographer is. The interview will be influenced by their own agendas and life experiences, so it will be important to ask the photographer's background and potential factors that would influence how they

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<sup>1</sup> The questions answered by photographers' work will be similar questions should interviews occur. If I am able to successfully schedule interviews, I will construct an interview question sheet to use.

<sup>2</sup> Can be theoretical or literal framing of photographs

respond to questions about their work, and why they photographed in the first place.

I will also look at a potential agenda or bias that a photographer might have in having photographed a certain project, and this ties in with the use of Agenda Setting Theory. The journalistic application of Agenda Setting suggests that a photographer would typically have a goal in mind for their work, in order to help influence or change public opinion or policy on environmental reform that might affect the area in a positive way. Looking at a photographer's background and life experiences is also helpful in utilizing Framing Theory to see how the photographer literally framed an image, and also how the work is framed when the photographer responds to questions in an interview.

In addition to looking at the individual to show potential framing and agenda setting, the context of the time period the photographer created work in is also important. Was there a drought, environmental disaster, etc., that provided a motivating factor for them to photograph? The environmental movement is a relatively recent, post World War II phenomenon, and most photographers photographing the environment with a goal of creating change also are from the last half of the century. The Salton Sea photographers all began their work after the 1980s. This is a question I will ask photographers, to allow them to place their photos in context in their own words.

The images will also be discussed within the specific environmental issue being photographed or documented. For example, most of the photographers' works

center around the Salton Sea, but some are related to water rights and usage issues, while others center around the theme of the American Dream and “paradise lost.” These different approaches influence the end result of the images.

The end dissemination of the images will also be discussed. Were the photos published in a book, online, or in an exhibit? How was the work received, and did the photographers’ work result in any tangible change or aid with the environment they were photographing? How, when, and where photography is published is an important frame and be as influential as the literal frame of the photograph itself. Answering this question allows an overview from the analysis of why a photographer created an image and their background, to actual discussion of the images and project, to a conclusion on the project by looking at how it was published and its effectiveness.

### **Literature Review:**

The type of analysis and discussion of photography and the environment that I propose for the Salton Sea has occurred in the past, but with different specific photographers and projects. Since the environmental movement and photographers documenting changes is a recent development, there is not a large academic body of work looking at collective groups of environmental photographers. One recent and excellent example of this analysis occurs in the book *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform*, by Finis Dunaway. In the book Dunaway

looks at photographers from the last 100 years that photographed the American West who used their work to further issues of environmental conservation, etc. Not only does Dunaway analyze the photographs themselves, he delves into the biography of the particular photographer, to provide a context of their work, and effectively frames the photographers work within the broader environmental context.

Overall, Dunaway looks at early wilderness photographer, landscape Sierra Club books, and Great Depression documentary films on the west to construct an image of how photography “shaped modern perceptions of the natural world and led to the development of the contemporary conservation movement.”<sup>1</sup> The analysis also looks at “the artists behind the images... the way they were carried along by... the political and cultural winds.”<sup>2</sup> So, a large part of Dunaway’s analysis of the photographer, their life, and impact of work all come together to create a larger picture. Some of the photographers that Dunaway looks at and includes photographs are of Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter. I hope to approach the collective works of photographers at the Salton Sea in a similar way.

In addition to looking at environmental photography discussed, it is helpful to look at examples of specific photographers’ work outside of the Salton Sea. Many photographers have worked on water rights and environmental issues in the last few decades in the American West, and one recent example is John Trotter’s work

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<sup>1</sup> Finis Dunaway. *Natural Visions: The Power of Images in American Environmental Reform*.

<sup>2</sup> Dunaway

*No Agua, No Vida*. This documentary essay takes a macro look at the Colorado River and the siphoning of its water on the way to Mexico. In Trotter's own words, the "project examines human impact on our environment... My ongoing documentary project explores the perception of the river as a seemingly unlimited, plentiful resource, as well as the consequences of this belief."<sup>1</sup> Trotter's work is beneficial to the Salton Sea discussion because of its tangential relevance and broader context. Photographer Brian Frank also photographed a similar project following the Colorado River from its source to Mexico, and Frank's work may also be included to further the broader discussion.

Another environmental photographer in the American West is Eliot Porter, who photographed landscapes and scenes of the Southwest. His well known and influential work<sup>2</sup> brought serene scenes to the homes of Americans, and helped to crystallize a vision of the American West in many Americans' minds. By showing the beauty of the natural environment, rather than its degradation, Porter was able to help influence public policy aimed at preservation of the environment. This is helpful because it is more of a prevention approach, whereas most photographers at the Salton Sea are already photographing changes that have occurred. While Porter's approach was fine art, its beneficial for the discussion because of its notoriety.

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<sup>1</sup> John Trotter Photography Portfolio

<sup>2</sup> Eliot Porter Collection, Amon Carter Museum

Most photographic projects on the Salton Sea are relatively recent, with most work occurring in the last 15 years or later. Since the Salton Sea did not flood towns until the early 1980s and the visual impact took time to materialize<sup>1</sup> after the flooding, the three main photographic books on the subject were published after 2000. This is likely due to the need for photographers to spend time documenting the area, both for its size and need for variety.

The first project, *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-Down California* is a complete work on the Salton Sea, Imperial County, and border area surrounding the Salton Sea. The photography and writing center around the history of the Salton Sea and the role that water rights, irrigation, and taming the Colorado River played in bringing the sea to the present state. Photographer Joan Myers and writer William de Buys worked together over a number of years to publish the first book looking at the decay of the Salton Sea area (de Buys and Meyer, 1999). De Buys aims to create a discussion of ways to save the Salton Sea, based on his writing of how the sea was decaying in 1999. Joan Meyers, the photographer, approached the project with a 4x5 camera and photographed in black and white. The images in the book are large prints and plates on each page. It is a documentary photo essay of the overall geographic area and natural environment of the area, rather than a photo story focusing on a family, specific town, etc. However, both de Buys and Meyers

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<sup>1</sup> After settlements were abandoned after the flooding, it took a few years for structures to deteriorate in the desert climate

interacted with extensively and wrote about migrant laborers working in agricultural areas and those living in the region.

Shortly after *Salt Dreams* more work was published on the Salton Sea, this time in the form of a photographic retrospective entitled *In Search of Eldorado*. Photographer Christopher Landis photographed the sea over a near-decade long period, also with large format, in black and white. The book is really a 33-page photo book, with additional text framing the images in the context of the Salton Sea, also by Landis. Landis's approach is also documentary, photographing dead palm trees, abandoned pools, etc., in a graphic format, contrasting shapes and tones in the context of the desert sky and emptiness of the surreal place. Comparatively, *Salt Dreams* is more of a book with photographs by a separate photographer, whereas *Eldorado* is a photography book first and foremost. Put together, these two books represent the earliest two examples of work that looks at the Salton Sea as a victim of environmental change, water rights, and urban decay. Both works are photographed with large format cameras, and are in black or white or monochrome images with toning, along with a narrative. Both photographers had an agenda to raise awareness about the decaying Salton Sea and show readers the impact of environmental change.

*Greetings From the Salton Sea* by Kim Stringfellow came some time after *Salt Dreams* and *Eldorado* and built upon those previous works, both photographically and writing-wise. The author, Kim Stringfellow is both a scholar and a photographer. Most of Stringfellow's work tends towards the writing side, but her



photographic work is fairly extensive and in depth of the area. The 2005 book is mostly a history and analysis of the area, with photographic inserts, and an interactive website as well<sup>1</sup>. “The project discusses the historical, social, and ecological background of this unique place through photography, text, archival real estate promotion films, and collected objects. “(Stringfellow, 2005) In this case, the photographer wears multiple hats, writing, photographing, and encouraging conservation efforts. In addition to the two previous works, Stringfellow also has a clear agenda to find a fix for the Salton Sea. The published work also resulted in multiple gallery showings, and large metro newspapers in Southern California such as the *San Diego Tribune* reviewed the work of Stringfellow.<sup>2</sup>

Around the same time period *National Geographic* photographer Gerd Ludwig published a photo-essay on the Salton Sea, featured in *National Geographic's* February 2005 print issue. Images and text from the project are still available to view on NGM's and Ludwig's website.<sup>3</sup> Ludwig takes a classic *National Geographic* look at the entire region, with a large focus on the people, economy, and of course climate in the area. In his summary of the photographic work, Ludwig portrays the Salton Sea as “a victim of geography and hard-ball politics, the Salton Sea is California's largest, most troubled lake” (Ludwig). While the article was published in 2005, Ludwig has continued to photograph the area since he lives in Los Angeles,

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<sup>1</sup> Kim Stringfellow's Salton Sea Page: [http://www.kimstringfellow.com/salton\\_sea/](http://www.kimstringfellow.com/salton_sea/)

<sup>2</sup> San Diego Union Tribune review of Stringfellow's work: <http://www.kimstringfellow.com/san-diego-union-tribune-reviews-greetings-from-the-salton-sea/>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.gerdludwig.com/stories/salton-sea-daily-life/#read\\_story](http://www.gerdludwig.com/stories/salton-sea-daily-life/#read_story)

and recently held a photography workshop in April 2012 at the sea at the Palm Springs Photo festival, and continues to photograph in the area.

In the formal news media, there has also been coverage of the Salton Sea, but outlets like the *Los Angeles Times* and on *New York Time's* Lens Blog (Jim Lo Scalzo, 2011). Due to its regional focus on Southern California, the *Los Angeles Times* is the best example of actual news coverage of the area. Their coverage tends to focus on current events in the area, from the closing of the State Park on the Salton Sea to the odor of dead fish wafting into Los Angeles. There has not been a large focus on long-term story telling in the area, and the result has been a collection of stories and photographic vignettes. Nonetheless, they still represent an important part of the existing photographic "literature" on the Salton Sea and the lack of lengthy photo essays is as telling as if there was one.

For example, a recent article entitled *Salton Sea Confirmed as source of L.A. Basin Smell* summarizes a foul odor that covered much of Southern California in early September 2012. The article is written like any other news piece, and includes a single photo from *Los Angeles Times* photographer Luis Sinco. It is not an extensive gallery (Luis Sinco, 2012). However, the multiple *Los Angeles Times* articles usually have photos, and the images add up. Therefore the *Los Angeles Times* photographic coverage of the Salton Sea adds to the existing body of work, albeit in a more news-like rather than documentary form. This is beneficial to the overall analysis because it provides an alternative point of view from the published books and *National Geographic* work.

Other photographers that have documented and photographed the Salton Sea in the last decade and published photos either in an online gallery or as prints include, Noel Kerns, Jeff Frost, Aaron Huey, Troy Paiva, and Scott London. Their work in many cases overlaps existing published work, and may be examined as the project goes on to provide additional context to the literature and photographs reviewed above. These five photographers are all working journalists or artists, and have not published a formal book.

An additional, non-photographic resource that is helpful is *The Salton Sea Atlas*, which will be used for geographic information and scientific background when discussing environmental changes to the Salton Sea (Redlands Institute, 2005).

**Description of Changes to Project Proposal:**

Overall the end result of completing a book and photographic essay about the Salton Sea were a success and according to plan. The two changes that occurred during the project were the exact field dates, and the use of drones for aerial imagery. I expected to spend large amounts of time during a specific period at the Salton Sea, but due to me being hired for a full time job and seasonal heat, I spread the fieldwork over the course of multiple months. This allowed me to better reflect on different trips, and to make the editing more manageable.

Drones were not used for the project, although I invested close to \$1,000 in a GoPro and DJI Phantom quad copter for the project, the technical issues in getting the drone to fly proved too time and resource consuming, and in August I abandoned the drone portion and chose to focus on the images only. This is reflected in project updates I have sent to my committee.

## **National Geographic Magazine Young Explorer's Grant Proposal For Photographing the Salton Sea**

**Please list the special qualifications of the Team Leader for the proposed project.**

Stuart Palley has photographed at the Salton Sea since he was 15 and is intimately familiar with the geography, culture, and history of the region. He has developed local contacts in the area, residents who live near the Salton Sea and who are willing to provide information and access in a remote area. Stuart also is in contact with experts at the University of Redlands on the Salton Sea who are open to assisting him with technical details. Stuart has also photographed in the area over the last two years and scouted locations to photograph and met residents willing to share their lives on the Salton Sea as it more rapidly dries out.

Currently Stuart is undergoing flight and technical training for piloting remote control fixed wing aircraft, quadcopters, and other aerial vehicles for mapping and aerial photography of impacted areas. In addition to traditional still images and storytelling on the ground, aerial images will be used to create an interactive map online where users of a website can click on a specific area of the Salton Sea to view what's occurring on the ground. Stuart owns a 4 wheel drive vehicle, most necessary visual equipment, and has outdoors experience to work in a desert environment.

**Please list the media experience of the Team Leader for the proposed project.**

Stuart is a master's student in photojournalism at the University of Missouri and has completed award winning long-term photo essays and multimedia projects in remote areas requiring a high degree of self sufficiency. Stuart's initial photos from scouting the region show that a story is present on the drying out of the Salton Sea that can be told over the long-term. The Dying Salton Sea is also Stuart's master's project at Missouri and he has the support of experienced faculty and photographers.

Stuart has worked as a coordinator for College Photographer of the Year, Pictures of the Year International, and has interned for the Orange County Register, The Taos News, and the Columbia Missourian newspapers as a photographer. At the internships Stuart worked on a daily basis and photographed sports, spot news, long-term stories, and produced multimedia pieces. Stuart is well versed in the use of digital SLRs, off camera strobe, digital medium format, and multimedia components such as cinematic video and professional audio gathering, as well as editing.

**Have you had any prior media involvement with National Geographic? If so, what was the involvement and who did you work with?**

No, I have not had any prior media involvement with National Geographic. However, I received an award in the 67th College Photographer of the Year competition last fall and National Geographic photo editor Kurt Mutchler was one of the judges.

**Have you been in contact with any National Geographic media group about this project? If so, who have you been in contact with?**

Yes, In Spring 2011 I attended a Young Explorer's workshop while a senior undergraduate at Southern Methodist University in Dallas. I received feedback on the project and was encouraged to move forward.

**In addition, you must provide creative and detailed examples of how to convey the results of this project through stories presented in popular media formats.**

I will photograph at the Salton Sea starting fall of 2013 to show the human and environmental impact of dropping sea levels. Final results will raise awareness about water usage in Southern California, potential health hazards of a dried sea, and show lives of area residents. Fieldwork is over a 4-month period and involves

overnight stays at the Salton Sea with Palm Springs as a base. The end result is traditional still photography combined with groundbreaking use of aerial “drones” to provide place setting images conveying the dropping sea levels in an interactive website. Results will compel Southern California stakeholders to consider the consequences of letting the Salton Sea die out. Portraits and landscapes will be photographed with a Mamiya 645 medium format camera and digital back to capture detail and depth of field not available with 35mm.

There is no outlet at the Salton Sea, and it has steadily increased in salinity content, heavy metals from agricultural runoff, and other pollutants. The Salton Sea is at 45,000 PPM of salinity, whereas the Pacific Ocean is at 35,000. Every few years, millions of fish die off in the sea. There is also a human side to the Salton Sea, towns inhabited with trailers, those on the run from the law, those on welfare, and a few hardy “Desert Rats” who eschew regular societal integration. A dried Salton Sea could be catastrophic because there are allegedly heavy metals in muck at the bottom of the sea. If exposed to the high desert winds, these metals could get into dust storms and blow towards Los Angeles. Imperial County currently has one of the highest incidence rates of childhood asthma in the United States.

The online interactive website starts with a map of the Salton Sea region. Using Google Maps, geotagged photo locations will allow users to zoom to a specific area of the Salton Sea. Users can click on Bombay Beach and it will take them to a traditional still photo gallery on Bombay Beach. Thumbnails on the map will feature aerial photos of a smaller area within the sea, photographed via remote control fixed



winged aircraft or quadcopters outfitted with still and video cameras. For example, there would be a thumbnail of an aerial shot of the entire town of Bombay Beach. Civilian “drones” can also be used to gather footage for multimedia pieces giving access to locations that only a helicopter could provide. For the cost of a few helicopter flights, an entire aerial system can be outfitted and used on a daily basis.

Images taken from an altitude of 400-500 feet with a lightweight Micro 4/3 camera with a wide angle or fisheye lens would show the receding shoreline and salt/mineral deposits that threaten to make dust storms worse and impact regional health. These images can be composited to create large and detailed images. The area is largely rural and FAA Class G airspace, meaning that recreational use of remote control aircraft is permitted.

**Please list all team members and local collaborators including their name, their role in the project, and their media experience.**

Stuart Palley, principal photographer and content producer. Will research and photograph the project with traditional cameras and remote aerial vehicles.

David Rees, Missouri photojournalism faculty chair, professor, and graduate project chair (advises and directs overall project).

Bill Allen, project committee member, instructor for “Drone Journalism” course, and agricultural journalist.

Pat and Tacy Southard, North Shore residents (local collaborators) with numerous area contacts who are concerned with preservation of the Salton Sea.

The Redlands Institute at the University of Redlands, completed a project on the Salton Sea in 2005. The project mapped the Salton Sea’s geography and resulted in *The Salton Sea Atlas*. The Redlands Institute has agreed to provide me with technical data and information as the need arises.

**Do you have any media commitments to other organizations for this project? If so, please list.**

I have no formal commitments with media outlets, however I must show results of photography and/or a story to my graduate project committee as part of the academic side of this project to complete my master's degree. Photography and results would be burned onto a CD and store in the University of Missouri library as a graduate project, but no rights or usage to images will be given, it purely academic and in no way affects National Geographic's use and right of first refusal to images and content.

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