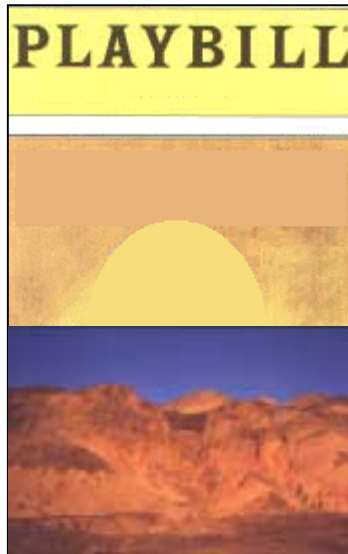


**Review of the Program on the Science Channel:
The Geological History of Death Valley**



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The Geological History of Death Valley

PLAYBILL

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The Main Characters

The Geological History of Death Valley television program featured one protagonist with many antagonists as well as sympathetic or unsympathetic characters. The **protagonist** was the mountain range, carved over millions of years by a supporting cast of **antagonists**:

- Wind
- Water
- Erosion
- Earth movement
- Volcanoes
- Dry air
- Alluvial fans (outpouring of a rock slide)



Alluvial Fan

Other players were **sympathetic or unsympathetic characters** created by the conflicts between the protagonist and antagonists:

- Sparse vegetation such as colorful, drought-tolerant beds of flowers, desert holly, and cacti
- Faults
- Canyons
- Valley floor
- Lakes
- Lake beds
- Dunes
- The Racetrack
- The Salt Creek
- The Salt Marsh
- The Salt Flats
- The Devil's Golf Course
- Five indigenous species of desert pup fish (Yes! In this desert's lakes!)



Dunes



Desert Pup Fish

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The Plot, the Conflict, and the Resolution

All the characters' actions carried the **plot** toward resolution. A narrator explained how the antagonists interacted with the earth and how the **conflict** created the **resolution** of the mountains and other players. This information was peppered with discourses, which added credibility, between Michael Colliers (a geologist, landscape photographer, and author) and Bill Dietrich from the University of California at Berkeley.

The Science

Geological information was masterfully explained in this program, which provided supporting and interesting facts such as the following:

- Death Valley can have temperatures as high as 134 (probably Fahrenheit, since this program was created by and for Americans) for the air and 200 on the ground.
- It's 282 feet below sea level.
- Death Valley is 150 miles long and 20 miles wide.
- It's the driest place in the United States, with less than two inches of average annual rainfall. Some years have no rain at all.
- While the rain can be gentle, it is generally a deluge.
- Death Valley's highest mountain is 11,000 feet. It can have snow on its peaks as late as May.
- Fossils of sea snails prove the former presence of water in some areas.
- Originally, only one species of pup fish existed in Death Valley. The five species today have evolved as lakes separated from the first school.
- Death Valley sits only 15 miles above the earth's lava core—in contrast to most other areas on earth that are 30 miles above the core.
- Flash floods of water, sediment, mud and rock periodically has rushed through canyons forming and polishing the mountain's walls.
- Over time, layers of sediment from these slurries created the colors in the rocks that we see today.
- The mountains receive four times as much precipitation as does the valley.
- Radiocarbon dating of items found in petrified rat nests provides clues about vegetation present and the cooler climate in 400 BC.

The Geological History of Death Valley

The Audience

While the program described how fascinating the evolution of the mountains, dunes, and other players has been and answered many questions for the general viewing audience, it left us wanting to know more. For example, why does the earth rip apart? Surprisingly, the program didn't touch upon plate tectonics or any reason why this phenomenon occurred. And why has it occurred at this location? It briefly mentioned something concerning several bodies of water off the coast of California, but it was not long enough for the audience to absorb the information with all the other facts being conveyed in the program. Also, why didn't the program include shots of Death Valley in the winter? The gorgeous and awe-inspiring cinemaphotography during the summer months left the audience wondering what the ice and snow formations looked like in this venue. Another fact curiously omitted was the name of the highest mountain in Death Valley (called Telescope Peak according to climber Petter Bjørstad). Lastly, what is the lowest temperature at Death Valley?

Additionally, the program's commercials provide interesting insight about who the producers considered its audience members. The first commercial was for the www.x3dgaming.com software game; it featured testimonials from teenagers about 13 to 19 years old. A few commercials were for other Science Channel programs such as Brainchild, Technoledge, and Monster Garage. The remaining commercials seemed to be for more mature audience members:

- An unnamed drug for acid reflux disease
- ADT alarm systems
- Procrit, a drug, for chemotherapy-related anemia and fatigue
- Bose radio
- Leptoprin, a diet pill for people who are 50 pounds over their recommended healthy weight
- Term life insurance
- Puritan's Pride vitamins
- Neighborhood watch program
- Plug-in pest chaser
- Craftmatic adjustable beds

Denouement

The program ended with a discussion about the future of the Death Valley area. Some scientists speculate that the earth's crust will continue to stretch and Death Valley will eventually sink into the Gulf of Baja California. But that's probably millions of moons from now.

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