State parks show will air next month

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When Sally Kaplan and David Vassar started working on a documentary about California's state parks, the park system was not such a hot topic. But now, the current political climate surrounding the park system could make their film "California Forever" especially relevant.

The two-part documentary spotlights the past, present and possible future of California's park system, which predates the country's national parks and at one time included the iconic Yosemite Valley.

It also features local Calaveras Big Trees State Park, which is near the filmmakers' part-time residence in Arnold.

"California Forever" will air on PBS stations in and outside of California, including Sacramento's KVIE on Sept. 9, 12, 16 and 19. The show will run in most of the state's television markets, and stations will pick it up as far away as Hawaii and New England.

The film documents the formation and expansion of the state park system, from 1864 to the present. It will spotlight 46 of the 278 outdoor and historic parks, giving viewers an idea of the scenic and cultural value the system has to offer.

Vassar, a native Californian, said the state's park system has a strong connection to public land policies around the country. Just look at the first park managed by the state — Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove — which didn't become a federal park until 1906.

"The birthplace of the park idea, it happened here," Vassar said during a phone interview on Monday.

The project also looks forward, examining the challenges the parks and the system might face during challenging times for the state.

Vassar and Kaplan started working on "California Forever" four years ago, long before budget cuts, closure lists and hidden funds made the system a hot political topic. But they say the

timing of its release is a good thing, as Kaplan said they hope this reminds viewers of why these places were preserved in the first place.

"It could not come at a better time, because in fact, it elevates the conversation," Kaplan said.

Vassar and Kaplan, who alternate living in Southern California and Arnold, both came to the project having completed multiple outdoor-related television programs and documentaries that have aired on the History Channel, Travel Channel, Food Network and elsewhere.

Both also worked on the Harrison Ford narrated film "Discover Hetch Hetchy," which has been in the middle of a recently revived campaign to restore the river valley and drain the reservoir.

Vassar said the first spark of inspiration for the film came when developers and conservationists were debating proposals to build a toll road over part of San Onofre State Beach. Both were "taken aback" by the lack of outrage over the proposal, and considered putting together a program that would remind people in California of "the legacy that the state parks protect," he said.

"I think now more than ever is a really great time to remind Californians of the legacy, the cultural heritage and natural heritage that scenic lands and historic places protect," Vassar said. "You really are talking about the crown jewels of the state."

California's state park system includes 1.4 million acres and attracts more than 82 million visitors a year. The film highlights the scenic, historic and cultural, moving from locations like the wooded streamside trails under the world's largest living things at Big Trees to the stories of the state's Chinese immigrants as they moved through Angel Island in the San Francisco Bay.

The parks, Vassar said, "protect the very essence of what it means to be a Californian." And if the films inspire anything, they say they hope it's to get people out to experience those places.

"Don't take these places for granted," Kaplan said.

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