

Sundance Review: The Lake – A Powerful but Partial Look at Great Salt Lake Crisis

Description

Directed by Abby Ellis | 93 minutes

Produced by Fletcher Keyes. Edited by Abby Ellis & Emelie Mahdavian. Featuring Dr. Ben Abbott, Dr. Bonnie Baxter, and Brian Steed. Executive Producers: Sandbox Films & Little Monster Films.

Park City, UT – *The Lake* arrives at a moment of profound ecological urgency for Great Salt Lake – an ecosystem collapsing in real time, a region breathing toxic dust, and a state struggling to face the political and moral consequences of decades of water mismanagement. Early in the film, standing on what should be shoreline, someone remarks quietly, “This should be lake right here,” and another responds, “That’s like the moon. The destruction is incredible.”

A scientist later holds up a photo taken from the International Space Station and reflects, “I love it because it puts the lake in the context of the planet.” The documentary positions itself as a wake-up call, weaving together interviews with environmentalists, researchers, and policymakers. But while its intentions are earnest, its framing ultimately limits the story it attempts to tell.

Strengths of the Film: Science, Symptoms, and Early Warnings

One of the film’s strongest contributions is its clear presentation of ecological facts: vanishing bird colonies, increasing salinity, 800 miles of exposed lakebed, and dust storms carrying arsenic, cadmium, and other toxic metals. On Gunnison Island, a biologist gestures across piles of bones and collapsed nests: “They’ve been building nests for hundreds of years” and this year, there were zero.

The scientific warnings are striking. “We estimate a 1.2 million acre-foot deficit per year,” one expert explains. “There’s only about 7 million acre-feet left in the lake overall.” Another adds, “The batting average is zero for these lakes” once they slip into structural decline, none have been restored.

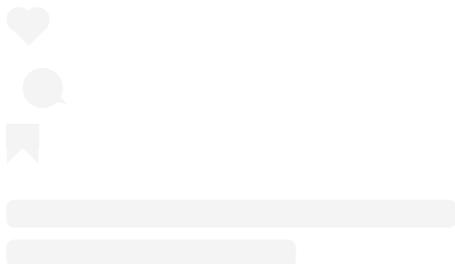
The public-health implications are equally dire. Dust analysis reveals, “Every measurement we took for arsenic around the lake was red.” An atmospheric scientist warns, “The PM 2.5 will stay in the atmosphere until it rains out—about two weeks.”

These moments offer clarity: Great Salt Lake is in a state of collapse. But even here, the film softens its political critique, allowing state officials to appear more proactive than their records demonstrate. Awareness without accountability becomes another performance—and the lake does not have time for performances.



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Cultural Narrowing: Whiteness, Christianity, and Erasure

Where the film stumbles most is in its cultural framing. Despite the demographic and religious diversity of the Wasatch Front, *The Lake* centers almost exclusively white, Christian voices. A Latter-day Saint family prays over dinner: "We pray that all of us can be filled with love and understand the importance of caring for our home—and later, a farmer frames water policy through providence: "God brought us here into these valleys, not to have us die and disappear. When deity is ready to fill that lake, it'll be filled."

Even the director, Abby Ellis, acknowledges in the press notes that "most of the characters in *The Lake* are members of the LDS faith," reinforcing that the film's worldview is shaped almost entirely through a single religious lens.

It is not inherently problematic that many participants share a faith tradition; religion is undeniably part of Utah's political landscape. But in practice, all the central characters appear to be members of the same denomination, and the film never steps outside that worldview. It treats this single doctrinal lens as the default cultural perspective on the crisis.

The narrowing is not only aesthetic—it is political. By allowing these perspectives to stand in for the region as a whole, the film eclipses the communities who are most vulnerable to the lake's collapse: Black, Brown, Indigenous, immigrant, working-class, and downwind residents already experiencing dust-related symptoms. And nowhere is this erasure more glaring than in the absence of Indigenous nations. This isn't merely a representational oversight; it shapes the very boundaries of what the film imagines the crisis to be.

Indigenous Exclusion: A Structural and Ethical Failure

Across two hours, the film includes no Indigenous elders, no tribal representatives, and—judging from the credits and Sundance materials—no non-white voices at all. As a result, the documentary frames the crisis almost entirely as a scientific puzzle and a water-rights dispute—rather than a multilayered emergency that is cultural, historical, and deeply tied to the land and peoples who have lived with the lake the longest.

This exclusion is not a neutral oversight. It echoes a deeper dynamic named in the film itself, when a scientist notes, "For most of Earth's history, water has flowed downhill. But water now flows toward money. Or more generally, toward power." Stories flow toward power, too.

If the filmmakers had reached out to Indigenous nations, they would have found leaders more than willing to speak about how the lake's collapse affects their homelands, ceremonies, language, kinship systems, and futures. The crisis is not only physical—it is cultural and spiritual. Indigenous perspectives are essential—not optional—to understanding what is truly at stake.

The Endangered Bird Argument: A Troubling Moral Logic

One of the film's narrative pivots involves the push to list Wilson's Phalarope under the Endangered Species Act. Advocates argue, "If we get Wilson's Phalarope listed, we can force state compliance," and "Of all the levers the state is worried about, that might be the biggest one."

While legally sound, the film allows this framing to stand without interrogation. The implication—intentional or not—is that the lake will matter only if a federally protected bird depends on it. That logic is morally fraught.

Reducing the value of Great Salt Lake—and the lives connected to it—to a regulatory threshold dismisses its inherent worth. Of course, if federal listing becomes the only tool left, it is better than nothing. But it should not have to come to that.

The crisis already carries a moral imperative.

Why These Omissions Matter: The Crisis Is Relational

This crisis is not simply ecological—it is relational. It is tied to histories of extraction, growth-at-all-costs politics, settler colonial land use, and policy decisions that favored expansion over survivability. Scientists warn, “Great Salt Lake remains on life support today,” while families contemplate leaving: “Utah was supposed to be my final home! pollution and politics might force me out.”

The story cannot be told truthfully without those communities who already feel the consequences in their lungs, land, and water. Nor can it be told solely through policymakers, farmers, and scientists.

A fuller narrative requires accountability—not just awareness.

The Limits of Incrementalism

When political leaders appear, the film presents a familiar tension. Governor Cox reassures an audience: “They keep hearing the lake will dry up in five years and we’ll all die from dust or whatever. Not true, by the way.”

Meanwhile, scientists say the opposite: “We are within just a couple of hot, dry summers of ecological collapse of the lake. Great Salt Lake is a ticking time bomb.”

Incrementalism—a sprint followed by a marathon—as one official puts it—cannot meet the speed of an accelerating crisis. Downwind communities already report respiratory difficulties, dust episodes that max out monitoring instruments, and uncertainty about whether they can safely remain in the state. Winning slowly is losing. The contrast between cautious political messaging and urgent scientific warnings becomes one of the film’s most revealing tensions.

What a Fuller Story Would Require

A fuller story of the lake would:

- include Indigenous leaders and land-based knowledge systems
- center working-class and immigrant communities living downwind
- trace the crisis to structural decisions, not just drought
- confront the consequences of Utah’s unprecedented growth
- acknowledge that water, policy, culture, and sovereignty are entangled

As one scientist says, “We’re flying blind because data, funding, and political will remain inadequate to the scale of the emergency. A complete story would refuse blind spots, refuse comfort, and refuse to pretend that hope alone will save us.”

The Filmmakers’ Intentions vs. Their Blind Spots

The filmmakers clearly care. Their footage is urgent and intimate. We witness late-night calls between scientists like Dr. Ben Abbott (“It’s crazy, dude! I’m thinking about my kids, your kids, all of the kids downwind”) and moments where the work becomes painfully personal.

One of the most striking scenes follows Dr. Bonnie Baxter—who has worked on the lake for more than two decades—as she visits a doctor after developing sudden, unexplained shortness of breath. She describes episodes where her “lungs feel like they’re filling up with cotton,” a frightening shift after years of fieldwork without respiratory issues. Sitting in the clinic, she listens as the physician explains that the dust blowing off the exposed lakebed carries carcinogenic metals—arsenic, cadmium, lead—and that long-term exposure could pose serious health risks.

The camera lingers on her face as the reality settles: the crisis she has been documenting scientifically may now be harming her physically.

This sequence reveals what the film captures most clearly: Great Salt Lake’s collapse is not theoretical or distant—it is unfolding in real time, inside real lungs. The scientists and environmental experts featured in the film go far beyond their professional responsibilities—opening their homes, their fears, and their exhaustion to the camera. What they are doing is an act of care, of public service, and of personal risk. Their voices carry weight because they are grounded in lived experience and ethical urgency.

However, care—when filtered through a narrow lens—becomes constrained by what the film chooses not to show. Without widening the narrative to include Indigenous nations, downwind communities, and the full political landscape that shapes this crisis, crucial truths remain unspoken. A film about ecological collapse must also be a film about accountability—not just about the people doing the work, but about the systems that created the emergency in the first place.

The Narrative Problem: Utah’s Fragile Story About Itself

In one scene, the governor jokes, “You had us all pray, and now everyone thinks it’s fixed,” a nod to Utah’s habit of framing ecological crises through providence when policy fails to keep pace. That tendency toward optimism—religious, cultural, political—reveals a deeper narrative problem: the belief that faith and positivity can shield the state from material consequences. Residents are already contemplating relocation; scientists compare the Great Salt Lake to global catastrophes like Lake Urmia.

Governor Spencer J. Cox speaks with an almost startling assurance that “Utah will be the one exception,” insisting that Great Salt Lake can defy global patterns of collapse. But this confidence—however well intentioned—underscores exactly why political optimism is not a plan.

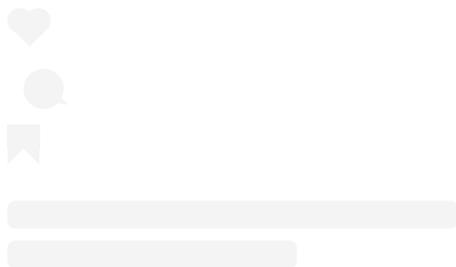
Cox cannot see the future, and no amount of certainty from a governor can replace the structural action this moment demands. His insistence on exceptionalism exposes the fundamental tension in Utah's narrative: the belief that faith, optimism, or providence can outrun ecological reality. Prayers and philanthropy are not going to fix Utah's problem; only an honest reckoning with the moral corruption embedded in decades of political inaction and extractive policy will.

For generations, Utah has relied on a story of abundance, divine favor, and exceptionalism to justify unsustainable growth and water use. But now that the crisis is undeniable, that story is straining under its own weight. The lake will not be saved by comforting narratives, symbolic gestures, or assurances that "it will all work out." It can only be saved by confronting what created this crisis in the first place—and by telling a story that reflects the truth rather than the myth.



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Final Reflection: The Lake Will Not Be Saved by Partial Stories

The lake cannot be saved through stories that erase Indigenous nations, or by pretending that salvation hinges on whether a single bird earns federal protection, because it should not have to come to that. What the lake cannot survive is political hesitation masquerading as prudence, or narratives that comfort rather than confront.

If *The Lake* is a beginning, let it be the beginning of a much larger, more honest conversation—one that refuses erasure, demands accountability, and honors the interconnected lives that depend on this place.

Great Salt Lake deserves a story as expansive as its horizon, as complex as its ecosystems, and as unflinchingly true as the crisis itself. And we deserve nothing less as we face what comes next.

*Importantly, Indigenous filmmakers are now releasing work that brings forward the cultural, spiritual, and historical dimensions of Great Salt Lake—perspectives absent from *The Lake* but essential to understanding the crisis. Their films speak directly to what is at stake for the nations whose homelands and futures are tied to this place.*

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