

'Ice People' takes you to scientists' extreme lab



By Doyle Rice, USA TODAY



Enlarge

Handout

On Sundance Channel: Adam Lewis, left, and Allan Ashworth are looking for fossils in Antarctica.

There are no waddling penguins or cuddly seals in the documentary *Ice People*, director Anne Aghion's desolate vision of Antarctica that airs tonight on the Sundance Channel (10 ET/PT).

Instead, most of French-American filmmaker Aghion's movie was shot in the bleak, unforgiving landscape of Antarctica's Dry Valleys, one of Earth's driest and most extreme environments, where no animals live.

Shot in a minimal style, with no narration, explanatory maps, graphics or subtitles, and little music, the film portrays the cold, grueling, sometimes backbreaking work of four American geologists in search of 14-million-year-old fossils.

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"I wanted to convey the sense of what it's like to be down there and to do that kind of science," Aghion says. In Antarctica, she says, "you live at the rhythm of nature, and that nature is particularly harsh."

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Indeed, these aren't the scientists in white lab coats you see on TV commercials, intently studying computer screens or glass beakers. The geologists in this film endure temperatures that bottom out at 25 degrees below zero in an environment more akin to Mars than Earth.

"I wanted to explore the process of doing the kind of science that takes you 10 to 20 million years back in time," Aghion says. For her, the on-location shoot was "an extraordinary experience."

During the course of the film, which was shot from August to December 2006, four scientists — two professors and two undergraduate students from North Dakota State University — scour ancient lakebeds and fields of boulders for tiny signs of past life to prove the evidence of a green Antarctica, which disappeared with a massive cooling of the continent 14 million years ago.

"To be in a place which is so underexplored, as a geologist, and to have the opportunity of making a discovery is pretty powerful medicine for a geologist," lead scientist Allan Ashworth says in the film.

Ashworth and his team look with wonder at the discovery of a near-perfect leaf impression on a rock, which may not seem too extraordinary to viewers, but they can certainly appreciate the scientists' excitement at the find. In fact, some of the team's fossil discoveries captured in the film were part of a 2008 journal article about the Earth's cooling millions of years ago.

Part of the documentary also profiles life at the McMurdo research station, where technicians and researchers provide support for visiting scientists. As one of the McMurdo staff says at the close of the film: "We do not come to Antarctica because we are in love with Antarctica. We come ... because we want a mystery to solve and we want a challenge, and there's one here. So that's why we come here."

The movie will also be shown in select theaters across the USA throughout the spring and summer.