

ANATOMY OF A SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION

CLEAR DISCOURSE FROM THE OUTSET IS CRITICAL, BUT ONLY BY TRANSLATING DISCUSSIONS INTO DIRECT POSITIVE ACTION CAN A PRODUCTION BE CONSIDERED SUSTAINABLE. HERE'S HOW MAX DID IT FOR *TRUE DETECTIVE: NIGHT COUNTRY*.

WRITTEN BY LISA Y. GARIBAY





True Detective: Night Country costars Jodie Foster and Kali Reis.

COURTESY OF HBO

Thousands of metric tons of carbon emissions. More than 150,000 single-use plastic bottles. 4,000 gallons of gasoline. Literal tons of waste in landfills. This is what HBO's much-anticipated *True Detective: Night Country* saved with its commitment to sustainable production practices.

These staggering results (among many more) started with one critical factor emphasized over and over by showrunner Issa López, executive producer Mari Jo Winkler, and Heidi Kindberg, vice president of sustainability for HBO and Max: communication.

True Detective: Night Country earned an EMA Gold Seal with a whopping 186 points (only 125 are required). Bestowed by the Environmental Media Association, the seal honors progress in sustainable production for movies, television shows (animated and live action), filmed commercials and print advertising.

To get there, the production followed a clear path that considers sustainability throughout the entire process, from script development through distribution. In early prep, the physical production effort is addressed before buying and building starts and before vendor agreements are made—so decisions are made looking through a green lens. That continues through post to premieres and distribution.

STARTING WITH STORY

For the fourth season of the popular *True Detective* anthology series, showrunner Issa López pitched a different type of narrative compared to previous seasons. Set in the High Arctic, two female detectives investigate the disappearance of scientists from a research facility that has been collecting, among other data, evidence of toxic pollution from a local mine. A cold case of a missing woman from the local Iñupiaq indigenous community may or may not be linked.

“The moment I realized where it was going to take place, I knew it was going to be related to the environment,” López says. “There was going to be an Arctic research station, and if you have Arctic research, they are always looking into climate change.”

Through her research, López discovered that life in northwest Alaska is entwined with mining companies that have both positive economic and negative environmental impacts on the region. “There was no way to tell this story in the Arctic with honesty without talking about these themes. So, I went all in with it.”

López credits Winkler with keeping her honest about the story she was telling and with the way that story was being told. “There’s a direct correlation between the criticism we’re doing of the ways of the world we live in and the way that we did the show,” López says. “We executed the show as an experiment in low impact. Even in extreme conditions, we could take the impact back toward zero.”

HBO, which has historically been one of the main drivers of sustainable production among studios, also went all in. “Climate storytelling, climate representation, and sustainable behavior modeling on screen are all important aspects of responsible storytelling,” Kindberg says.

Every Max and HBO scripted original is guided by Kindberg’s team to adhere to green policies outlined in six robust impact categories, with detailed sugges-

Showrunner Issa López and executive producer Mari Jo Winkler on the set of *True Detective: Night Country*.



PHOTO BY RICHARD GRAYSWARK

Battery-powered generators on location for *True Detective: Night Country*.



COURTESY OF HBO

tions and requirements that all shows under the banner are asked to adhere or aspire to.

Winkler's background provided a substantial benefit to that commitment. She began greening film sets in 2003 and cofounded PGA Green in 2007 and the Green Production Guide (GPG) in 2010. The GPG was established in 2010 in a joint effort between the Producers Guild of America Foundation's green committee and a major studios partner group, now known as the Sustainable Production Alliance (SPA).

When she was producing the series *Vinyl* in 2015, Winkler guided HBO to formalize its production sustainability efforts.

"Mari Jo came in with really high expectations and welcomed the HBO Green program from the beginning. She set the tone and supported all the efforts both practically and financially throughout the whole shoot," Kindberg says.

FINDING GREEN BANDWIDTH

When you are already working hard to cover the enormous range of needs and expenses for a production, how can you find the bandwidth to green that production on top of it all?

"You surround yourself with people whose mission is specifically the care of

the environment," López says. "It's not about keeping someone in the shadows of the production office. It's having meetings and making their mission part of what we're doing."

The day-to-day collaboration between Winkler and Kindberg was critical to the results achieved by *True Detective: Night Country*. Early planning made all the difference. That plan followed steps that Kindberg's office applies to every HBO project.

"Just like production in and of itself, the earlier it starts and the more prep there is, the easier it is," Kindberg says. "If A is more sustainable than B, and you make that choice in the beginning, then it's no more difficult than having made the traditional B choice. You're just choosing the more sustainable option."

CONNECTIONS

Once a show opens its production office, Kindberg initially connects with key personnel such as high-level producers, the line producer, production manager, coordinator and accounting representatives. A detailed conversation ensues to understand the show's premise, shooting locations and relevant parameters. For *True Detective: Night Country*, Winkler discussed sustainability with the heads of department to set the

stage, after which Kindberg's team took over with the details.

Then a designated main contact is determined, whether it's someone experienced in sustainable production or someone new to the role. Kindberg's team conducts comprehensive training, not just on the principles of sustainability, but also on practical tools. These include tracking the carbon footprint using resources from the GPG, a tool kit that any producer can access at greenproductionguide.com. The landscape of sustainable technology evolves rapidly, bringing new opportunities to utilize clean power.

It's up to the producers to get the sustainability plan back to their production and implement it on site. "We work closely with them to make sure they have the resources they need and to troubleshoot together," Kindberg says. Though different companies may approach this differently, the common goal is to work toward emission reduction, decarbonization and effective waste management.

Every department should feel empowered to ask how their role can approach sustainability. It starts the minute they have their team assembled. "When you have your DP on, it's a conversation with them about lighting



On location in Iceland for *True Detective: Night Country*.

instruments. It's a conversation with their crew about a power plan and right-sizing your generators and looking at efficient lighting," Winkler says.

"It's really a dream when a producer like Mari Jo reaches out to us before we get to them because it means either they're expecting sustainable production requirements and they want to include them from the start, or they're interested in doing it as much as they can to lessen their impacts—or, best—both," Kindberg says.

This scenario is becoming more common, with the first call no longer catching anyone off guard. "But if you're uncertain about whom to contact or if no one has initiated contact for your show, inquire with your production executive about their corporate production sustainability person," Kindberg advises. Major studios and streamers typically offer robust programs, and all GPG and Sustainable Production Alliance members have representatives actively addressing sustainability efforts.

LOCATION, LOCATION

While evaluating potential shooting locations for *True Detective: Night Country*, clean energy availability became a significant factor. Time constraints ruled out the option to shoot on a volume stage for reduced carbon emissions. The show's setup didn't align with the longer development required for that approach.

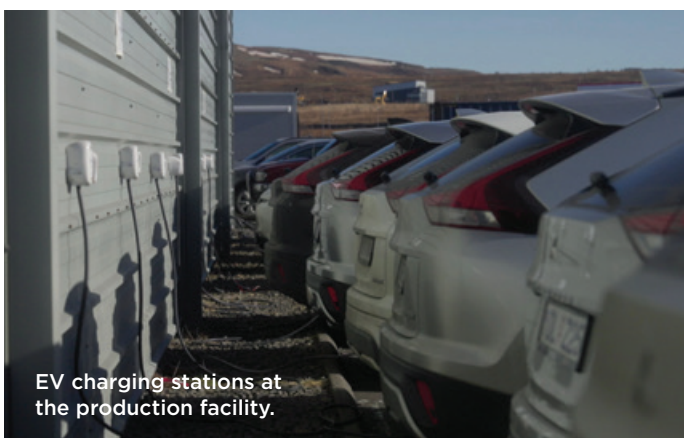


"Issa crafted this piece for the High Arctic of Alaska without ever setting foot there. So the first thing we did was scout in March 2022," Winkler says. "We went to Nome and then Kotzebue, which is 29 miles above the Arctic Circle, where the entire place was frozen at minus 22 degrees. It was obviously not hospitable for large-scale production."

Nonetheless, the scout proved invaluable in shaping the vision of the show. López, Winkler and their team were hosted by an Iñupiaq family, and



Left and above: Waste management—including recycling and compost—and charging/coffee/water stations on location during the production of *True Detective: Night Country*.



EV charging stations at the production facility.

they met even more locals along the way.

Although additional locations were considered, Iceland's landscapes and infrastructure made it optimal for the needs of *True Detective: Night Country*. A 35% tax credit sweetened the deal. The production team carefully balanced location shooting with stage production and the impact of building sets for the show's Arctic research facility and several characters' homes. Iceland relies on 100% clean energy for its electricity, with 63% being geothermal and the remainder hydroelectric. This fact further enhanced the appeal of Iceland as a filming location.

DATA TO INFORM AND INSPIRE

Once the crucial decision to film in Iceland was made, it was time to put all other efforts into practice.

A sustainable production isn't a one-time proclamation; it requires consistent reminders and active engagement throughout the project. Regular updates provided to cast and crew during the shoot fostered excitement and built a sense of community on set.

"I knew we were doing well with sustainability, but I didn't really connect the dots until I started to see the data and the stats," Winkler says. "Once you measure it, it's easier to manage it. And every time you measure, you realize how you could do better."

Instead of traditional stages, Iceland offered warehouses and a few newly developed stage spaces—all of which operated, of course, entirely on clean energy. Consequently, indoor sets were constructed and shot without using fossil fuels, because the entire base camp was connected to the clean energy grid. Approximately 76% of its energy came from clean sources, while 24% came from fossil fuels. That was in part because nighttime exterior shoots in the cold tundra necessitated the use of diesel-burning generators. However, the production piloted an emissions-free, battery-powered generator—referred to as "the benerator"—to offset some of the fossil fuel usage.

Renting 40 electric and hybrid vehicles saved 15,000 liters of gas, thanks to widespread availability of charging stations. An analysis conducted by Kindberg indicated that shooting in other locations would have resulted in double or triple the carbon emissions factoring in considerations like flying in cast and crew.

For Winkler, it's crucial to emphasize the importance of crafting a clean energy plan for productions and the need to transition away from fossil fuels. Fuel savings can often offset the cost of new green equipment. The film industry can play a pivotal role in promoting and investing in this green tech. The more people invest in it, the more the demand, the better the supply, and the lower the costs become.

"It's a choice of how you prioritize how you spend the resources," Winkler says. "It makes for a more positive experience for everyone. It's remarkable how cast, crew and the people in neighborhoods where you're filming feel about being on a clean set, not having diesel spewing or pollution spouting out. This has taught me to keep pushing and to keep addressing it with every film company, every director, showrunner and crew member."

True Detective: Night Country employed Sustainable Film, a UK-based consulting firm that facilitated sourcing batteries and equipment from the UK. “One of the facilities managers in Iceland invested in the emissions-free generator. So we planted seeds for Iceland to move away even more from things that they might normally use fossil fuels for,” Winkler says.

“The best part, which always has to come first, is now their local producers and their local crew have put their hands on this technology and understand it,” Kindberg says, noting that one location production company has already stated they will apply the best practices taken from HBO’s green program into projects going forward.

The show purchased carbon offsets for emissions from physical production calculated using the Production Environmental Accounting Report (PEAR), which was created in partnership by the Sustainable Production Alliance and the Producers Guild. As a nod to the show’s setting, *True Detective: Night Country* contributed to the Alaska-based forest preservation project A Bearadise.

STAYING ON-MISSION

Under Winkler’s guidance, HBO further elevated its commitment to sustainability by applying the same best practices and footprint tracking used in the production for its inaugural documented green premiere for *True Detective: Night Country*. The green premiere in LA featured a fully pescetarian and vegetarian menu, the elimination of diesel generators, electric vehicle transportation for talent, digital check-in, and composting.

“And it’s the first time that we’re officially tracking it all with the intention for these green practices to continue at every event going forward,” Kindberg says.

Iceland’s 100% clean power ticked an important box for the production. In Los Angeles, productions have access to renewable diesel that’s readily available at the pump for a price comparable to petroleum diesel. In early January,

“IT MAKES FOR A MORE POSITIVE EXPERIENCE FOR EVERYONE. IT’S REMARKABLE HOW CAST, CREW AND THE PEOPLE IN NEIGHBORHOODS WHERE YOU’RE FILMING FEEL ABOUT BEING ON A CLEAN SET, NOT HAVING DIESEL SPEWING OR POLLUTION SPOUTING OUT.”

New York City celebrated the grand opening of its first fuel station serving renewable diesel.

But productions shoot globally. In one location, it might be easy to get clean mobile tech, whereas in another, such tech is out of reach, but composting is accessible. Kindberg urges productions to take advantage of sustainability infrastructure that’s there, while working with the production’s sustainability exec to solve for what isn’t there.

“Every producer, director, line producer and production manager should be in contact with their directors of sustainability and then have a relationship with those people. I was talking to Heidi a lot. And if you want the utmost integrity, you have to staff it. You have to make room in your budget for that,” Winkler says.

Winkler cites the precedent of COVID to demonstrate how budgets can be adjusted to foster sustainability practices. During the pandemic, budgets were

tweaked to allow for personal protective equipment, consultants, testing and more to get a production back on its feet. Winkler suggests that the same could be done to ensure sustainability given that the global climate crisis may endanger our industry.

“It makes an incredible difference to have support from the top down, both from Issa and Mari Jo as well as the support that we get inside HBO and Max to have our shows go through this program. Without that top-down support, it’s a lot more of a hustle and a struggle,” Kindberg says. “Our goal is ultimately to have production and sustainable production be synonymous, and with the help of sustainability-oriented producers, we can do that.”

“Discourse has to be joined with action or it is nothing, and it disappears into the air,” says López. “It’s the only way to sleep at night. Anything else is just for your image and profoundly dishonest.” ■