



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**OUR PLANET HAS SURVIVED FIVE MASS EXTINCTIONS
SMITHSONIAN CHANNEL™ AND TANGLED BANK STUDIOS PARTNER TO
INVESTIGATE WHETHER WE ARE ON THE BRINK OF A SIXTH
MASS EXTINCTION: LIFE AT THE BRINK
PREMIERES SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30 AT 8PM ET/PT**

**Acclaimed Actor Jeffrey Wright
To Narrate One-Hour Television Special**

New York, NY, September 17, 2014 - It's a mystery on a global scale: five times in Earth's past, life has been nearly extinguished, the vast majority of plants and animals annihilated in a geologic instant. What triggered these dramatic events? And what might they tell us about the fate of our world? **MASS EXTINCTION: LIFE AT THE BRINK**, narrated by Jeffrey Wright, a new one-hour special premiering Sunday, November 30 at 8 p.m. ET/PT on Smithsonian Channel, is produced by Tangled Bank Studios, the film and television unit of the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI).

The program joins scientists around the globe in search of answers to two of the most dramatic mass extinctions: the "K/T Extinction," which wiped out the dinosaurs, and "The Great Dying," which 250 million years ago annihilated nearly 90% of all Earth's species. These early mass extinctions could hold clues for what may be happening today.

University of California, Berkeley Paleontologist Anthony Barnosky suspects that the wheels may already be in motion to trigger the sixth mass extinction. Only this time, instead of volcanoes or asteroids, humans are the trigger. In bones of ancient animals, in tidal pools in California, and in forests in Yellowstone National Park, the evidence is mounting. As humans reduce habitat for other species and alter the atmosphere, we are pushing plants and animals toward extinction around 12 times faster than normal rates. But Barnosky, author of the new book *Dodging Extinction*, says it is not too late to halt that trend.

At first glance, the two earlier extinctions couldn't look more different. As illustrated with gripping animation, a six-mile-wide asteroid spelled near-instant doom for the dinosaurs. And as new research covered in the film shows, it was massive volcanic eruptions – which spewed enough molten rock to bury an area the size of the continental U.S. under 1,000 feet of lava – that altered the chemistry of the atmosphere and ocean to trigger "The Great Dying." As different as they seem, these two extinctions share uncanny similarities — and a message for

today. Could the impact of human beings be just as devastating to the planet as a massive asteroid strike or volcanic eruptions?

“There couldn’t be a more relevant scientific story for today,” says David Royle, Executive Vice-President of Programming and Production, Smithsonian Channel. “This is a fascinating story about our deep past that touches and informs our present and future.”

“What’s really valuable about comparing these past mass extinctions is they were caused by totally different triggers,” says leading scientist and science communicator Sean B. Carroll. “An asteroid from above or volcanism from beneath. But they had very similar effects in terms of catastrophic destruction of ecosystems around the world. And there is a really simple lesson that is relevant today, which is, if environmental change is great enough, fast enough, and on a global scale, the entire planet is in trouble.”

“Because the planet’s mass extinctions happened tens of millions of years ago, identifying what caused them is quite a scientific detective story,” says Michael Rosenfeld, head of television and film for Tangled Bank Studios. “And so is solving the mystery of whether we are living through another mass extinction.”

Among the other experts interviewed in MASS EXTINCTION: LIFE AT THE BRINK are Dr. Kirk Johnson, the Director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History and Elizabeth Hadly, senior fellow at the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment and professor of biology and of geological and environmental sciences at Stanford University.

MASS EXTINCTION: LIFE AT THE BRINK is produced by Tangled Bank Studios for Smithsonian Channel. Executive producers for Tangled Bank Studios are Sean B. Carroll and Michael Rosenfeld. Tom Friedman is the writer. Sarah Holt is the producer, director and writer. Executive Producers for Smithsonian Channel are Charles Poe and David Royle.

ABOUT TANGLED BANK STUDIOS

Tangled Bank Studios is a production company established and funded by the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) as an extension of its longstanding science education mission. Dedicated to the creation of original science documentaries for broadcast, theatrical and digital distribution, the company aims to produce programs that capture compelling stories of discovery across all branches of scientific inquiry. MASS EXTINCTION: LIFE ON THE BRINK is the third film from Tangled Bank Studios, following the critically acclaimed three-part miniseries *Your Inner Fish*, which aired on PBS in April 2014, and the NOVA special *Vaccines – Calling the Shots*, which debuted in September. More information about Tangled Bank Studios is available, at www.tangledbankstudios.org or by following [Tangled Bank Studios on Twitter](#).

ABOUT SMITHSONIAN CHANNEL

Smithsonian Channel™, owned by Showtime Networks Inc. and the Smithsonian Institution, is where curiosity lives, inspiration strikes and wonders never cease. This is the place for awe-inspiring stories, powerful documentaries and amazing entertainment across multiple

platforms. Smithsonian Channel combines the storytelling prowess of SHOWTIME® with the unmatched resources and rich traditions of the Smithsonian, to create award-winning programming that shines new light on popular genres such as air and space, history, science, nature, and pop culture. Among the network's offerings are series including *Aerial America*, *L.A. Frock Stars*, *Secrets*, *Mighty Ships*, *Mighty Planes* and *Air Disasters*, as well as critically-acclaimed specials that include *Civil War 360*, *9/11: The Heartland Tapes*; *MLK: The Assassination Tapes* and *The Day Kennedy Died*. Find out more at www.smithsonianchannel.com.

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