The Cove
Discussion Guide

Director: Louie Psihoyos
Year: 2009
Time: 92 min

You might know this director from:
THE COVE is Louie Psihoyos’ first feature-length documentary film.

FILM SUMMARY

THE COVE is a daring, revelatory eco-thriller that exposes the gruesome secret of Taiji, a small seaside town in Japan. Along the curving coasts of Taiji are secluded inlets and lagoons, surrounded by steep cliffs that provide a natural barrier against onlookers. The many fences, razor-wire gates, and men shouting at potential trespassers form an even more menacing obstruction. At the risk of arrest and imprisonment, director Louie Psihoyos and activist Ric O’Barry gather an “Ocean’s 11” team of world-class free-divers, military and surveillance experts, and a special effects artist to sneak into these forbidden zones and install audio and video recording devices in the dead of night. The truth that they capture is horrifically vivid and shocking in its brutality.

Tautly paced and gorgeously shot, THE COVE reveals the underbelly of the dolphin captivity industry, as Taiji is the world’s largest supplier of dolphins to marine parks and “swim with dolphins” programs. Trainers from all over the world come to pick their favorites, and what happens to the remaining dolphins is what Ric O’Barry wants to uncover. O’Barry, once the star of television show, “Flipper,” feels gravely responsible for helping to spawn the lucrative dolphin captivity industry. He recognized the incredible intelligence and sensitivity of the “Flipper” dolphins, yet he did not realize the extent of their suffering until one died in his arms. O’Barry believes she committed suicide, as dolphins can control their breathing. For the past 35 years, he’s been trying to tear down the industry he helped to create. His atonement is palpable throughout the film. His anger lies in being ignored. But Academy Award winning film, THE COVE, makes certain that the acts being committed in Taiji do not go unheeded.
FILM THEMES

THE COVE addresses several inter-related topics, from ecological crimes and animal rights to public health hazards and governmental deception.

CAPTIVITY INDUSTRY
The animal captivity industry, including marine parks, has been designed for human entertainment, but we commonly use words such as education, research, and conservation to describe them. “Swimming with dolphins” is also a form of exploitation. In captivity, dolphins are confined in small tanks and must perform in order to be fed; whereas, in the wild, dolphins swim up to 40 miles per day in large social groups. In response to THE COVE, Marilee Menard of the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums, told the New York Times, “Our members have a tremendous breeding program, follow strict guidelines, condemn these practices and have none of these animals from Japan in our parks.”

MERCURY CONTAMINATION
Eating whale meat has long been a part of Japanese culture, but the film shows how dolphin meat is often mislabeled as whale meat and sold to the Japanese public. Dolphin meat is dangerously high in mercury - twenty times higher than the recommended levels - but Japanese authorities claim it is safe. The film reflects on the mercury poisoning that occurred in Minamata, Japan in the 1950s, when a major chemical company dumped methylmercury in local waters. People ate the mercury-contaminated shellfish and fish, which led to serious illnesses and birth defects. The government covered it up for many years.

OCEANIC ECOSYSTEM
Ric O’Barry states that what’s happening in Taiji is a microcosm of what’s happening in the rest of the world. Instead of only condemning Japan’s dolphin industry, viewers should reflect on worldwide environmental crises like overfishing, pollution and toxicity, climate change, and habitat loss. The damage of one ecosystem affects the rest of the world. The theme of inter-relatedness also extends to economics, as Taiji’s dolphin drive is driven by the lucrative captivity industry, with trainers coming from all over the world to buy dolphins for hefty sums.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES
Shuya Nakatsuka, of the Japanese Embassy in Washington, wrote: “the catch quota of dolphins is set by the Japanese government based on scientific information to maintain the stock level for sustainable use.” He also added that because food cultures and dietary habits are “historically established,” national and cultural differences should be respected. A fisherman in the film notes that the Westerners kill and eat cow, and dolphins are just another animal. Some could argue that THE COVE imposes specific cultural values onto another, especially in its cinematic framing of heroes, victims, and villains.
FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. How does THE COVE’s cinematic elements of espionage, adventure, and thriller impact your reaction to the footage that is revealed at the end of the film?

2. Scientists have proven that dolphins and whales have a very sophisticated physiology, a highly developed emotional sense, and a keen intelligence. Do you think dolphins deserve a special rank in the hierarchy of animals and should be accorded special rights?

3. Dolphin trainers communicate with dolphins through sign language. However, dolphins have no hands. What does this one-sided communication reveal about the human-dolphin dynamic?

4. Why do you think the dolphin captivity industry has been so successful, particularly in terms of entertainment?

5. Those who oversee dolphinariums feel that their industry has been misrepresented by the film because they do not buy dolphins from such drives, which they consider inhumane. Instead, the majority of dolphins in the U.S. are bred in captivity. Does this difference matter to you? Why or why not?

6. How are the Taiji dolphin drives similar to and different from factory farming and slaughterhouses in the U.S.?

7. After viewing THE COVE, do you feel differently about marine parks and zoos in general?

8. Do you think you have purchased or eaten mislabeled food? Do we, as consumers, have any way to verify the validity of a food’s label or packaging?

9. Given the dangers of mercury contamination, do you think doctors should regularly test for mercury poisoning? Since mercury levels have increased in many kinds of seafood, should we eliminate or moderate our consumption?

10. If what happens in Taiji, Japan is a microcosm of the rest of the world, as Ric O’Barry says, what can you do to reverse the damages in the microcosm in which you live? How can your conscious actions reverberate to affect other parts of the world?
FILM FACTS:

- Dolphins in the wild travel up to 40 miles per day and spend 80% of their time deep below the surface exploring the ocean's depths. They need continuous movement.

- 53% of dolphins that survive the violent capturing process die within 90 days.

- The average lifespan of a dolphin in the wild is 45 years. Half of all captured dolphins die within the first 2 years of captivity, while the other half live an average of 5 years.

- A dead dolphin can bring about $600 USD on the Japanese market for its meat. But a live trained dolphin can fetch $150,000 or more on the global market from dolphinariums.

- Without action, global mercury emissions could grow by 25% by 2020, creating health crises and diminished IQ. But implementation of existing pollution-control technology could lower global discharges by up to 60%.

- Ric O'Barry discovered another big dolphin trade in the Solomon Islands where the meat is used for food and the dolphin teeth are used for purchasing brides, which often leads to killing far more dolphins than are needed for subsistence.

- Ric O'Barry and his son Lincoln helped stop dolphin hunting and capture in three villages in the Solomon Islands. But the killing continues in other Solomon villages.

- Taiji fisherman started using a new process of killing dolphins, whereby a sharp spike is shoved into their neck behind the blowhole. The wound is plugged up to stop bleeding, and the dolphins continue thrashing for minutes on end. The Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science has confirmed this method as inhumane.

- According to the Oceanic Preservation Society, Japanese consumers are buying less dolphin meat than ever.

- The Indian government has taken a strong stance against dolphin captivity. Dolphin captivity was also banned by Costa Rica, Hungary, Chile, U.K., Switzerland, Norway, Luxembourg, Slovenia, Cyprus, Croatia, and Brazil.

- Director Louie Psihoyos is working on another film titled 6, which addresses the upcoming Sixth extinction. It will be the largest extinction since the dinosaur age, and the first caused by a single species: humans.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Talk about it. Give others an opportunity to learn and make informed decisions.

2. Continue to support Oceanic Preservation Society (OPS) as these dedicated filmmakers keep one of their camera lenses focused on the ocean.

3. Sign the petition against dolphin hunting. Communicate with your government agencies, as well as media people, law enforcement officials, and civic organizations. Make some noise.

4. Take the pledge not to buy a ticket to a dolphin show or a swim-with-dolphins program. Consumers have the power to make or break this industry.

5. Become informed about the mercury levels in seafood and decide if you should start limiting your consumption. As a general rule, the larger the fish, the more mercury it contains.