



## Racing Extinction Discussion Guide

Director: Louie Psihoyos

Year: 2015

Time: 90 min

**You might know this director from:**

The Cove (2009)

## FILM SUMMARY

Director Louie Psihoyos is no stranger to the world's contrasts. Having traveled the globe with numerous highly esteemed publications, he has photographed both beauty and despair, creation and destruction. With 2009's "The Cove," he honed in on the killing of dolphins in Japan. Rather than directing his lens on another specific issue, he instead zooms out in RACING EXCTINCTION to examine the global concept of mass extinction.

A true lover of animals, Psihoyos travels from gory warehouse floors in the illegal Chinese wildlife trade to the rapidly melting landscape of the Arctic, leaving no stone unturned. Calling on an impressive cast of scientists, activists, academics, photojournalists, and animal lovers, he makes the case that by exposing the reality of immense mass extinction through imagery, positive action is possible. In his words, "If you can show people the beauty of these animals, there's a chance to save these things."

By spreading it all out on the cinematic screen, RACING EXTINCTION has no intention of ignoring just how desperate the situation is. It points the finger at ocean acidification, livestock methane emissions, dwindling plankton reserves, spiking carbon levels, and basic human consumption as just some of the many issues pushing an alarming number of species over the brink into extinction. The film makes no qualms about it: "What happens to the planet is now in our hands," as stated by Boris Worm.

"We always think that there's going to be somebody else around to save these animals," states Psihoyos. Not this time. "As we face more and more animal extinctions, we need more and more of these indomitable spirits. We need more people to understand it's worth doing," Jane Goodall reminds us. RACING EXTINCTION is a stark reminder of the terrible impact we've had and the positive change we can make.

## FILM THEMES

As the planet pummels towards its sixth mass extinction, arguably set in course entirely by humanity, a wide range of artists, activists, and ordinary people set out to inspire others and rewrite our global destiny.

### MASS SCALE EXTINCTION

The Earth has undergone five mass extinctions, when major portions of species were eradicated. The last of these took place 65 million years ago, an asteroid wiping out the dinosaurs. Nothing to worry about now, right? “We are changing the environment precisely along the lines that can trigger off one of these great catastrophes,” warns J. E. N. Veron. The rate at which we are eradicating life on the planet is mindboggling, with daily activities causing immense lasting damage and threatening life as we know it. “Humanity has become the asteroid,” states Dr. Kirk Johnson. The current human trajectory is heading for the sixth mass extinction.

### EVERYTHING FEEDS THE DAMAGE

As the human species advances, the list of extinct species expands at an alarming rate. But what is the leading cause of all this destruction? As Psihoyos puts it, “There’s this incredible web where we’re all connected. If you take out one little thing...the whole web collapses.” From ocean acidification and dwindling plankton, to livestock methane emissions, to the illegal wildlife trade, to rising carbon dioxide levels, a host of factors contribute to the eradication of species and death of the natural environment. Rather than singling out one factor and honing in on a unilateral solution, a holistic approach is the only way forwards.

### ART AS ACTIVISM

In a world of seven billion people, the potential to communicate on global issues, reaching people with different customs, languages, and beliefs, is a daunting task. Photography offers a universal language comprehensible to all. “Imagery is very powerful,” states Paul Hilton. Everyone can see an image and be affected by it, regardless of the factors informing that individual. “Photo art isn’t just some sort of archive of things we lost. It’s a chance to get people interested, look these animals in the eye, and fall in love,” expresses Joel Sartore. By capturing reality on film, photojournalists take us to the heart of the matter, force us to face the reality of our world, and move us to action.

### HOPE IN THE SMALL STUFF

The issue at stake is gigantic, with mass extinction an overwhelming concept for anyone to comprehend. Feelings of helplessness and paralysis set in when people feel overwhelmed. Hope is fleeting when facing the massive concept of endangered species a whole. Yet as anthropologist Jane Goodall reminds us, “Without hope, people fall into apathy. There’s still a lot left that’s worth fighting for.” In order to keep hope alive and empower the individual to positively affect the lives of endangered species, it is essential to break the idea into small, manageable actions. As a single photograph Shawn Heinrichs took impacted an entire nation to cut back on their consumption of shark fin soup by 70%, so too can simple actions make a world of difference.

**“The whole world is singing, but we stopped listening.”**

Dr. Christopher Clark

**“Photography isn’t just about showing somebody how beautiful something is. It’s a weapon.”**

Louie Psihoyos

**“The small choice we make each day can lead to the kind of world we want for the future.”**

Dame Jane Goodall

## FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Describe your gut feeling once the final credits of RACING EXTINTION began rolling. Did the film instill a sense of hope or despair within you? How would you describe the film in 10 words?
2. Have you seen “The Cove,” director Psihoyos’ award-winning film on the killing of dolphins in Japan? If so, how would you compare it to RACING EXTINCTION? If you haven’t seen it, does the subject interest you?
3. Do you consider yourself to be an environmentalist? If so, in what ways did the film educate you? Would you consider yourself to be more impassioned/interested in the natural environment or the world of animals? Can the two actually be separated?
4. Do you think that we are heading into a sixth mass extinction? Do you believe the planet, and the species that inhabit this planet, are in as much peril as RACING EXTINCTION suggests?
5. Have you noticed the effects of global warming and climate change in your community? Do you know of any local endangered species? Do you know of any species to have become extinct in your lifetime?
6. Discuss the phrase: art as activism. How is photojournalism, and wildlife photography specifically, able to inspire and activate the public into action? In which ways is imagery more potent than words?
7. Photographer Joel Sartore states: “Life wants to flourish. DNA wants to go forward.” Discuss. By pushing the Earth beyond its healthy capacity, is humanity aiming to flourish and push its DNA forward?
8. When you think of an endangered species, is there an image of a specific animal that comes to mind? Why is this? Do we as humans connect more with certain species than others, and therefore feel more inclined to become engaged in helping their survival?
9. The film touches upon the difference between the planetary abuse doled out by the East vs. the West. Why is the trade in endangered species more prevalent, and accepted, in the East? How does the West make an “illogical disconnect” from the damage it causes to species and the natural environment as a whole?
10. What were your impressions of the projection project Psihoyos undertook with Travis Threlkel? What do you think was the greatest impact the project made?
11. What do you think of driver Leilani Munter’s decision to participate in a traditionally environmentally unfriendly sport in order to have her environmentally astute, vegan voice heard?

## NOTES:

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## FILM FACTS:

- RACING EXTINCTION had its world premiere at the 2015 Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize. The film went on to receive numerous award nominations and wins, including winning the International Green Film Award at the Cinema for Peace Awards. The film had its broadcast premiere on the Discovery Channel in over 220 countries in December 2015.
- At the age of 23, director Louie Psihoyos was hired as a staff photographer at “National Geographic,” where he worked for 17 years. He wrote and photographed the paleontological book “Hunting Dinosaurs,” and won an Oscar for 2009’s “The Cove,” a film documenting the plight of dolphins in Japan. In 2005 he founded the Oceanic Preservation Society, “to expose complex, global environmental issues and promote advocacy through the use of film, photography, social media, and collaboration.”
- Sushi chef Kiyoshiro Yamamoto, who served whale at the Santa Monica restaurant Hump, was sentenced to two years’ probation, fined \$5,000, and ordered to complete 200 hours of community service. Whales are protected in the U.S. under the Marine Mammal Protection Act.
- CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, an international treaty, first went into force in 1975.
- In 2014 the illegal trade of both live and dead animals was a \$19 billion business worldwide.
- On a Saturday night in the summer of 2015, using 40 stacked, 20,000-lumen projectors on the roof of a building in Midtown Manhattan, Travis Threlkel and Louie Psihoyos illuminated the side of the Empire State Building from 9pm to midnight with what Psihoyos called a “Noah’s ark” of animals. This was the first time moving images had been displayed on the building. The production, entitled Projecting Change: The Empire State Building, cost more than \$1 million and was partly financed by Hong Kong billionaire Li Ka Shing’s foundation.
- There are between 5–15 million species of plants, animals, and microorganisms on Earth today. This includes 300,000 plant, 4–8 million insect, 10,000 bird, and 4,000 mammal species. 23% of mammals and 12% of birds are threatened.
- Shark fin soup dates back to the year 960, when Chinese Emperor Taizu used it to express his power, wealth, and generosity.
- This era is called Anthropocene, or Age of Man.
- The prior five mass extinctions to have occurred on planet Earth include Ordovician–Silurian (439 million years ago), Late Devonian (364 million years ago), Permian–Triassic (251 million years ago), End Triassic (200 million years ago), and Cretaceous–Tertiary (65 million years ago). Many scientists suggest we are entering the sixth mass extinction, with animals going extinct 100–1,000 times faster than the normal rate.

## WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Share** RACING EXTINCTION with those in your life. In addition to our discussion guide, the film team offers a wide variety of engaging resources and guides to help bring the film to life through their website.
2. **Take** the RACING EXTINCTION [quiz](#) to see just how you are impacting the environment. The results offer a great opportunity to reflect on your actions and consider the far-reaching effect of your daily decisions.
3. **Embark** on the [Five-Day Carbon Cleanse](#), a way to begin fighting extinction through small actions. The challenge breaks the issues down into the categories of diet, energy, seafood, transportation, and advocacy.
4. **Identify** what triggers and inspires you into action by exploring the different ways in which the planet is affected by our lives and lifestyles. Visit the film’s [“Find an animal to save”](#) page to learn about some of the animals faced with extinction.

## We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

**Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.**