



Chasing Coral Discussion Guide

Director: Jeff Orlowski

Year: 2017

Time: 93 min

You might know this director from:

Chasing Ice (2012)

FILM SUMMARY

After tackling the challenge of publicizing the effects of climate change via glacial melt with the help of nature photographer James Balog in *CHASING ICE*, director Jeff Orlowski has teamed up with former ad-man and founder of The Ocean Agency, Richard Vevers and coral nerd Zack Rago to unveil the tragic fate of the world's unsung hero, coral. *CHASING CORAL* sees Orlowski and his team develop the first underwater time-lapse photography rig in order to document one of many coral bleaching events happening on the Great Barrier Reef. They hope that by capturing the death of these corals on film, they might be able to garner public support for the coral.

It turns out that even with the help of coral experts it's difficult to predict when and where coral bleaching might take place. Trial attempts to capture bleaching events in Hawaii, Bermuda, and the Bahamas were plagued by camera focus issues, while an initial attempt at the Great Barrier Reef failed due to unexpectedly cool weather. As a result, the team was forced to abandon their high-tech time-lapse rigs in favor of daily dives and manual photo setups. For weeks on end, Orlowski and Rago meticulously captured the bleaching event first hand, triggering a deeply emotional response within the crew as they witnessed the corals change from vibrantly populated ecosystems to bone-white barren graveyards.

Seeing the photographic evidence of these bleaching events is no less shocking second hand. The fact that 22 percent of the Great Barrier Reef died in 2016 is mindblowing in and of itself, but to actually see what that means is nothing less than horrifying. *CHASING CORAL* is a call to action centered around stunning underwater cinematography and a cast of passionate coral lovers.

FILM THEMES

In an act of cinematic environmental activism, director Jeff Orlowski and his team attempt to visually document the bleaching of the world's largest coral ecosystem, the Great Barrier Reef. In doing so, they hope to share a wealth of information about coral itself and display inarguable evidence that climate change is dramatically affecting the well-being of our planet.

CLIMATE CHANGE IS REAL

It's a lot harder to deny that climate change is real when hard visual evidence is (formally) living proof. In *CHASING ICE*, Orlowski showed how glaciers are melting at a previously unheard of rate using time-lapse photography. Here, he successfully documents the mass bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef due to increasing oceanic temperatures with manually captured time-lapse photos. Over the course of the film, what has long been a vibrantly colored and flourishing coral ecosystem filled with fish and sea creatures turns into a barren coral graveyard that no longer is able to process CO₂ and will eventually lead to further temperature raises in the future.

CORAL HAS A MARKETING PROBLEM

As is mentioned in *CHASING CORAL*, coral's biggest problem is that it is out of sight and out of mind for the large majority of people. And beyond being colorful and the home of many sea creatures, they are not inherently emotionally engaging. This poses a great problem in getting people to care about coral and recognize how important coral are to maintaining a sustainable living environment, not only for oceanic life, but for all life on earth.

BEARING WITNESS

A team of tech heads successfully designed the first underwater time-lapse photography rig in order to document coral bleaching events as they took place over the course of weeks. Unfortunately the team was forced to abandon it and had to commit to shooting the exact same shots, day after day, manually. Orlowski and Colorado-coral-nerd Zackery Rago were forced to witness the mass bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef first hand. There is nothing like watching something you love die a slow painful death, but they endured for the sake of science and activism.

GLOBAL SCIENCE

Coral bleaching is still a somewhat mysterious environmental phenomenon. Beyond the fact that temperature seems to play a major fact in when coral bleaching may occur, scientists don't know a whole lot more about why it occurs or how to stop it from happening. In order to find out more, the filmmakers sent a query out to fellow divers over social media asking where bleaching is occurring and much more. Being that this is a global problem, the best way to tackle the issue is to collaborate as much as possible!

“Most people stare up into space with wonder, we have this almost alien world on our planet, just teeming with life.”

Richard Vevers

“It's not too late for coral reefs... indeed, for many other ecosystems that are facing challenges from climate change. It's still possible to reduce the rate at which the climate is changing, and that's within our power today.”

Dr. Ove Hoegh-Guldberg

FILM FACTS:

- CHASING CORAL had its world premiere in competition at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival where it won the Audience Award for Best Documentary. The film went on to screen at other world renowned festivals, including Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival, Sheffield International Documentary Festival, and the Seattle International Film Festival. Subsequently, the film publicly debuted via Netflix on July 14, 2017.
- Zackery Rago, the self-proclaimed coral nerd and unassuming emotional center of CHASING CORAL, discovered his love of coral as a child when he spent his summers in the Hawaiian Islands. He later received a degree in evolutionary biology and ecology from the University of Colorado at Boulder. His love of marine life led him to work with [Teens4Oceans](#) and [View Into The Blue](#).
- According to the [National Ocean Service](#), “Warmer water temperatures can result in coral bleaching. When water is too warm, corals will expel the algae living in their tissues causing the coral to turn completely white. This is called coral bleaching. When a coral bleaches, it is not dead. Corals can survive a bleaching event, but they are under more stress and are subject to mortality.”
- Reefs formed by corals are one of the most biodiverse marine areas on the planet, housing thousands of species. This diversity is due to the fact that reefs are an important location for finding food, shelter, and mates for reproduction.
- The Great Barrier Reef, located off the east coast of the Queensland mainland in Australia, is the largest living thing on Earth (about 2,300 km in length and visible from space). It was [designated](#) by the United Nations as a World Heritage Site in 1981. To be included on the World Heritage List, sites must be of outstanding universal value and meet at least one out of ten selection criteria.
- On November 29, 2016, The New York Times [reported](#) that about 22 percent of the Great Barrier Reef died in a massive bleaching event. As quoted, “Scientists surveying the Great Barrier Reef said Tuesday that it had suffered the worst coral die-off ever recorded after being bathed this year in warm waters that bleached and then weakened the coral.”
- Contrary to popular belief, corals are not plants. They are actually animals and, oddly enough, relatives of jellyfish and anemones. Though corals are animals, they do rely on photosynthesis (the process by which plants use sunlight to synthesize food) to survive.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. **Support** coral reef preservation with donations or by volunteering time. Organizations like [Coral Reef Alliance](#), [Surfrider Foundation](#), [Reef Environmental Education Foundation](#), [Reef Check](#), [50 Reefs](#), [Project AWARE](#), and the [Coastal Conservation League](#) all work to preserve and protect our reefs.
2. **Be** energy efficient. Research the clean energy solutions available in your community and consider ways you can reduce your own energy consumption and carbon footprint.
3. **Join** local environmental organizations. Here are a few groups who may have chapters near you: [350.org](#), [Citizens Climate Lobby](#), [Environment America](#), [Environmental Defense Fund](#), [League of Conservation Voters](#), [National Wildlife Federation](#), [The Nature Conservancy](#), and [Sierra Club](#).
4. **Report** on reefs in your community. Scientists urgently need to understand which coral reefs bleached during the last three years, and also importantly, which did not. If you are a scientist or diver who regularly visits coral reefs or you know someone who does, email us at impact@chasingcoral.com to get involved.

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.