

What Lies Beneath: The Secret of *The Cove*

by Jeni Bauser

Imagine a tranquil, crystal clear lagoon. The water is so blue that you can see to the very bottom, and gaze at an array of colorful fish and other sea creatures, even dolphins, swimming beneath the surface. Now imagine a group of fisherman. Standing with the fisherman are animal trainers flown in from across the globe. Watch as they carefully maneuver hundreds of these dolphins into this secret lagoon, and violently harpoon every last one that isn't anointed beautiful enough for a seaquarium. A deep red now clouds the crystal blue water.

This is one of many heartbreaking scenes from the Academy Award-winning documentary, *The Cove*. The film exposes the brutal capture and killing of dolphins in a secret cove in the coastal Japanese town of **Taiji**. Those deemed "attractive enough" for display are sold to aquariums worldwide, and the remainder are killed and sold for their meat.

The film's protagonist is Ric O'Barry, who helped capture and train the five dolphins that starred in the 1960s Flipper TV [series](#), launching what would become a multi-million dollar industry. But since Flipper, Barry has become one of the most adamant and vocal opponents to keeping animals in captivity, and helped pave the road to this film's creation.

The Cove has received ample backlash, most notably in Japan. Last fall, Taiji officials threatened to sue the filmmakers prior to the film's screening at the [Tokyo Film Festival](#). There has been great debate over its release, not to mention the fear-mongering that has ensued: Last month, 50 riot police protected the film's Japanese distributor from violent demonstrators outside their Tokyo offices, and an angry mob of hired protesters showed up at the home of Takeshi Kato, the Japanese distributor, angrily beating on his door and making threats through loudspeakers.

This all begs the seemingly reasonable question: How is the brutal killing of over 20,000 dolphins a year sanctioned? The Japanese government

maintains that eating both dolphins and whales remain an important cultural tradition, and a critical element of national scientific research.

Dolphin hunts also occur in many other cities besides Taiji. The film's director, Louie Psihoyos, wrote in his blog that before the film was shot, hardly any Japanese knew that dolphin hunting was a relatively common national practice. And when they were shown the raw footage of the brutal killing in Taiji, every last person was horrified. But the fact remains that thousands of these feeling, [thinking creatures](#) are killed every year in Japan, sold to aquariums, or to consumers as whale meat.

Yet, only 1 percent of Japanese people regularly eat whale meat, or what they believe to be whale meat. Whaling accounts for 0.001 percent of Japan's economy, or less than one tenth the value of the country's yearly market for toothbrushes.

So what's really going on here, and why should the [Awakening Consumer](#) care?

The Cove is a microcosm of a much more pervasive and detrimental global issue. The film uses the jarring tragedy in Taiji to slap us in the face—to get our attention and address the greater issue of how we respect - or fail to respect the ocean, and the creatures living in it.

Perhaps like me, you live in a major city far from the sea, which makes it difficult to have a visceral feeling of compassion for regular, everyday fish. Perhaps the idea of harming a mammal like Flipper, however, pulls harder on the heartstrings (and that's the film's intention).

The truth is oceans are a part of our everyday life. We are vitally dependent on its resources, and yet less than 1 percent of the ocean is protected by law (for additional ocean facts, see Hank's article).

It does seem that some of us are starting to put the pieces together. 48 percent of Awakening

Consumers believe the oceans are in crisis, and 92 percent say they avoid eating particular seafood because of its scarcity.

Yet even for the Awakening Consumer, 57 percent are clueless about the [Marine Stewardship Council Seal](#), which certifies the fisheries that operate in an environmentally responsible way and help prevent overfishing.

We can help reduce our human footprint by curbing seafood consumption, protecting our wildlife from capture, and calling our political leaders' attention to these issues (visit www.takepart.com/thecove for 5 things you can do today).

But to truly engage Awakening Consumers, we need to appeal to their emotions. This was the approach taken by the producers of *The Cove*, and the film succeeded in garnering global attention and grossed over \$1 million in box-office sales. Such an emotional appeal would have far greater and, more importantly, long lasting affects on the Awakening Consumer's behavior than any single protest or petition.