The Cove meets *Blackfish*: Combating the Decimation of Cetaceans

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This year celebrates the five-year anniversary of the release of *The Cove* (Psihoyos, 2009), the heart-wrenching documentary that questions the ethics behind Japan's immoral cetacean practices. Since the release of *the Cove*, a new documentary, *Blackfish* (Cowperthwaite, 2013), has added additional momentum to the crusade to protect cetaceans and shut down the industries that oppress them. Both films are vital to share with anyone concerned with social justice and advocacy for non-human animals. These films draw upon a wide-range of academic groups, ecological organizations, grassroots activists, and individuals working within all sectors of society to help understand and end cetacean exploitation. The filmmakers sense that the best way to achieve lasting social change is through educating the public about the oppressive structures that abuse these highly intelligent, loving, and magnificent creatures.

The Cove, which stars Ric O'Barry, best known for his work on the television show *Flipper,* and now the leading activist against dolphin captivity, has won over seventy global awards including an Academy Award for Best Documentary in 2009. The director, Louis Psihoyos, is a *National Geographic* photographer and founder of the Oceanic Preservation Society. Psihoyos garners support from a pair of world-class divers, technical experts, and a handful of other advocates. All of whom work in conjunction with Psihoyos to provide visual proof of this ecological atrocity.

The Cove excels in educating the public, not only about the secret slaughter of approximately 20,000 dolphins annually, but also discusses other profound issues. These include increased mercury levels in the food chain, ecological degradation from overfishing, political corruption, and

the toll this takes on environmental health. Psihoyos provides the viewer with ample facts, vignettes, and analysis about these issues, stressing that attempts were made for diplomatic resolution. However, the Japanese fishermen, authorities, and other officials resist the accusations, outright lie about the facts, and deny responsibility. Without Japanese cooperation, the activists feel it is their duty to expose the truth about the Japanese whaling industry with the hopes of ending the mistreatment even if it means risking their lives, disrespecting Japanese custom, and breaking some laws along the way.

The Cove starts out rather peacefully, explaining why dolphins are special and deserving of moral treatment. From Ric O'Barry we learn about the uniqueness of dolphins and that they are among the most intelligent of all mammals. Not only can they learn highly specialized tricks, but can also manipulate their environment through the use of tools, teach behavioral traits to their offspring, interact in highly complex social structures, and use sophisticated methods of communicating language. There are countless stories of incidents where dolphins have saved human lives, and seem to demonstrate complex emotions such as empathy and depression. This evidence suggests that dolphins should be endowed with moral consideration and be treated as an end in themselves, not merely as a means to an end.

The philosophy that supports what happens in Taiji rests on the ideology of anthropocentrism, which privileges human interests over all other non-human beings. Some of the comments from Japanese officials make that view clear; dolphins have absolutely no intrinsic value and humans are the most significant beings on earth. The Japanese take on a certain logic of domination, whereby they assume that human beings are morally superior and that those who are superior have a right to dominate those who are subordinate.

O'Barry is utterly remorseful that his work on the *Flipper* show is partly responsible for popularizing the commercial trade of dolphins. Tearfully he says, "I was as ignorant as I could be for as long as I could be … I spent 10 years building and the next 35 trying to tear it down . . . if a dolphin is in trouble anywhere in the world, my phone rings." (Psihoyos, 2009) O'Barry comes across as an exhausted yet fearless leader, determined to spend the rest of his life making amends for supporting such a destructive industry.

One expects that the film would be filled with horrific slaughter scenes, but to my surprise, it included many warm moments. The beautiful scenes and tranquil imagery gives the viewer hope and a sense of restitution. It is only near the end of the documentary that blood is shed, as the crew films the barbaric slaughter scene in the secluded cove.

The cove is what O'Barry calls "a dolphin's worst nightmare." The dolphins' migratory route leads them past Taiji where fishermen disrupt their journey by using sonar. The sound is so maddening to the dolphins that in confusion, they end up trapped in nets. The dolphins are then sorted, with the most desirable dolphins (typically bottlenoses that resemble Flipper) corralled and sold to sea aquariums all over the world. The rest are left in the cove – a section of the beach that is secluded from the public because of its steep cliffs, high fences and razor wire – and are inhumanely harpooned, slaughtered to death for their meat.

The viewer senses that the filmmakers sincerely want to understand why the antagonists insist that their fishing policies are ethical. The filmmaker suggests that the treatment of dolphins is somehow connected to Japanese cultural traditions. The argument of cultural relativism dictates that if this premise is true, then their actions should be respected based on tolerance. However, the viewer learns that the majority of Japanese people are unaware of what happens to dolphins, and

when told, they appear shocked and appalled. Thus, the insistence that the mistreatment of dolphins is somehow connected to their culture and therefore should be respected fails to justify the practice. Instead, the viewer is left to believe this injustice continues solely due to the efforts of a small group of Taiji citizens, who protect the lucrative dolphin industrial complex for economic gain.

It is interesting to see how politics fuel the slaughtering of dolphins for their meat. Dolphin hunting is legal because small mammals are not protected under the international law that deregulated commercial whaling. In other words, the wording in the laws dictate that dolphins are not classified as whales, despite the fact that they are mammals. Even more disturbing is how the International Whaling Commission (IWC), designed to protect cetaceans, actually serves to promote Japan's unethical dolphin fishing practices. Japan coerces cash-strapped nations into protecting the slaughter of dolphins by offering them monetary rewards if they cast votes favoring Japan's IWC agenda.

Since the Japanese can't legally fish whales to the point of extinction, their plan seems to be on fishing dolphins to the point of extinction. Thus, dolphins are slaughtered and their meat is deceptively labeled as whale meat. It is given to Japanese children in their free-lunch programs at school and sold in the marketplace. Meanwhile, countless numbers of scientists have proven that dolphin meat contains high levels of mercury that is dangerous for human consumption.

Mercury poisoning is what caused the tragedy in Minamata, Japan. For years a ruthless Japanese industrial plant dumped mercury into the waterways causing thousands of deaths, illnesses and life-threatening birth conditions. Just as mercury poisoning in Minamata was ignored

by the Japanese government, the ingestion of improperly labeled dolphin meat by unsuspecting citizens suggests that history is about to repeat itself.

Blackfish (2013), like its counterpart *The Cove*, has gained critical claim, and is picking up its fair share of critics awards this year. The film focuses on the mistreatment of orcas in marine mammal parks like SeaWorld in Orlando, Florida. It also addresses SeaWorld's practice of separating mothers from calves, the increased mortality rate of orcas in captivity, and the alarming incidents of orcas injuring each others as well as their human trainers.

The film tells the story of one captive orca in particular named Tilikum, who stands accused of killing three humans. The viewer learns about how Tilikum has developed a form of animal psychosis, as a result of enduring three decades of captivity. The director, Gabriela Cowperthwaite, along with former SeaWorld employees, and whale experts, speak passionately about the immorality of the situation. They assert that Tilikum wasn't born a killer, but rather, was made this way.

During the film we hear from experts who agree; the trauma involved with taking an intelligent, territorial, and family-orientated creature out of its native habitat is wrong. Forcing it to do tricks in a small cement tank, depriving it of food in abusive training programs, and being contained with other aggressive orcas, is bound to cause behavioral disturbances. They boldly assert that keeping orcas captive for the sole purpose of turning huge profits, posses significant health risks, not only to orcas, but also the public at large.

An unfortunate, yet flaring oversight in the film, is SeaWorld's reluctance to grant Cowperthwaite on-screen interviews. As a result, it could be characterized as being somewhat one-sided in its presentation of the facts. Regardless, the information gathered in the film covers 40

years worth of time. This includes testimony from former SeaWorld whale hunters, former SeaWorld researchers, and trainers who worked for SeaWorld as recently as two years ago. Much of *Blackfish* is told through the oral testimony of regretful former trainers who are determined to set the story straight. The viewer can easily sympathize with the ex-trainers who describe their tender feelings for the very creatures whose exploitation they contributed to.

Interwoven with oral testimony, the viewer is confronted with footage that is very difficult to watch. We see whales being ripped apart by other whales in small tanks, whales bleeding profusely from being "raked" which is when one whale scrapes its teeth along the side of another whale, whales being so bored that they gnaw on cement walls, and trainers being bludgeoned and attacked by whales. Taken out of context one might suppose the humans are the only victims. Yet, given that these magnificent creatures are exposed to years of mental and physical distress, one comes to realize that both humans and the orcas are the victims. Behind the scenes we learn about the incredible stress orcas endure. Some whales develop painful ulcers, while others are forced to give birth to calves that are either dead or die soon. In any case, captivity comes with extreme emotional distress that is hard for the viewer to justify.

One of the key contributors to *Blackfish* is whale researcher turned activist, Howard Garrett. Garrett argues that keeping orcas in solitary, small, confined spaces runs completely counter to their nature as free-roaming, emotionally affectionate, family-orientated species. Moreover, Garrett asserts that orcas have never been known to attack humans while living in the wild. He also explains that female orcas live as long as human females, and in some cases they near one hundred years of age. They maintain very close, loving bonds with their families, most especially with their offspring. Males are also a part of the family unit and can live at least fifty to sixty years in the wild.

Contrary to Garrett's studies, SeaWorld boasts that their orcas live longer in their care than in the wild, with their orcas nearing twenty-five to thirty years. SeaWorld also denies that a female orca's offspring live with it for its entire lives; presumably they say this to justify stealing babies from their mothers. SeaWorld presents itself publically as an entity devoted to research and conservation but with all of these documented abuses tarnishing its record. One would think such a benevolent place like SeaWorld wouldn't want to turn a profit. The impression is that SeaWorld, despite professing its commitment to education and conservation, refuses to take moral responsibility for what they do to disrupt our fragile ecosystem.

Through these astonishing films, we see glimpses into the dark side of humanity and learn important lessons about greed, politics and the nature of animal ethics. What these advocates risk to expose the horrors taking place in this industry is truly honorable. There are many scenes that would enrage anyone yet also moments of serenity – and it isn't just these animals that create this effect but, also the people dedicated to their protection. The fact that there are individuals and organizations dedicating their life to the eradication of cetacean abuses provides a great deal of satisfaction. They provide our future with a much-needed glimmer of hope that perhaps the wrongs done to these animals might possibly be corrected. The argument supporting the protection of these animals is so convincing that it would be almost impossible to walk away from these films and not feel a personal responsibility to help solve it. Unfortunately, these creatures cannot fight this battle alone, so citizens must spread the word to educate others of their plight.

These films are so well crafted that taken in tandem, they have the potential of raising consciousnesses and creating systems change to improve our world. Both films publicize these problems on a global scale, holding both the Japanese fishing industry and aquariums like SeaWorld accountable. They must account for wasting precious animal lives, poisoning our environment, and

disrupting our ecosystem. The intent is not to vilify the Japanese or SeaWorld – it just so happens that these two entities are the most well known offenders. Rather the goal is to create a space for critical commentary about the destructiveness of captivity. The exploit of these mammals will continue unless we, as a moral community, take action now!

References

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Psihoyos, L. (Director). (2009). *The Cove* [Motion Picture].