

# Freeing Flipper

Ric O'Barry may not be a household name, but his work in the 1960s gave the world one of its best-loved television characters: Flipper. The TV series inspired a global love affair with dolphins and created a multi-million dollar industry O'Barry has since spent 37 years fighting *against*. His role in the hard-hitting documentary film *The Cove*, set to hit Swiss screens on January 14, exposes how dolphins are exploited for entertainment and their meat. *Swiss News* sat down with him for an in-depth discussion.

By Matthew Beattie | For much of the 1960s, Ric O'Barry lived what seemed an idyllic life. As a dolphin trainer for the Miami Seaquarium, he was a pioneer of the dolphin entertainment industry. His work for the hit U.S. television series *Flipper* provided wealth, fame and the opportunity to live alongside his charges in a beachfront house – also used as the set for the series. Living so close to the five dolphins that played the lead character, O'Barry developed strong bonds with all of them. He also began to appreciate just how intelligent, complex and sociable these creatures were.

"Dolphins are self-aware," O'Barry explains. "When *Flipper* aired, I used to take a television out to the pier with a long extension cord so the dolphins could watch. They would react whenever they saw themselves."

## Atonement

The death of the *Flipper* dolphin Kathy in March 1970 was a sledgehammer blow for O'Barry.

"She died in my arms ... It was suicide," he says. "Dolphins are not instinctive breathers, like we are; they choose when to take a breath ... Kathy just closed her blowhole and refused to take another breath."

Over half of captive dolphins die during their first two years in captivity. Wild dolphins live in large and complex social groups called "pods" and travel an average 40 miles [60 kilometres] per day. The shock of adapting to confinement and isolation often proves too much, as in Kathy's case.

Heartbroken, and convinced of the psychological cruelty of keeping dolphins in any form of captivity – especially dolphinariums – O'Barry renounced his lucrative career and launched a crusade against marine mammal exploitation and the very industry which once employed him.

His atonement for Kathy's death has continued for 37 years. He has lost count of how often he has been arrested; he is permanently banned from the IWC (The International Whaling Commission); he has attracted acclaim and controversy in equal measure. Despite setbacks, O'Barry remains dedicated to his cause; he has successfully released more than 25 captive dolphins in countries around the world.

## Taking the fight to Japan

Until recently, the small Japanese fishing village of Taiji was hardly known to the outside world – the dark secret its cove holds, even less so. Taiji's fishermen feed a multi-million dollar industry, but their prey are not tuna or cod. This unassuming Japanese village, set amid rugged cliffs, is a leading supplier of live dolphins to the world's dolphinariums (large aquariums, where dolphins are used in shows to entertain the public).

On the surface, Taiji loves its cetaceans: it is home to a whale and dolphin museum and counts dolphin-watching pleasure cruises among its attractions. This is, however, a deception, according to O'Barry, whose discoveries led to his teamwork with *The Cove's* director, Louie Psihoyos.

Hidden from view in a secluded cove – far from the eyes of tourists and with the full knowledge of the authorities – the same fishermen who supply the dolphinariums are slaughtering thousands more dolphins each year for their meat, which unscrupulous dealers try to pass off as whale meat (a delicacy in Japan), says O'Barry. What the fishermen and townspeople don't realise, this meat is tainted with dangerously high levels of mercury – a substance found in particulates from coal-fired power stations – that is impacting marine ecosystems.

"Dolphin meat is actually poison," is O'Barry's stark summation. "It has more mercury in it than the fish that sickened the town of Minamata [Japan] in one of the worst incidents of mercury poisoning in modern history ... The bigger the fish, the more mercury it contains."

When O'Barry heard about Taiji, he set out to investigate the situation for himself. What he found upon arrival shocked him into immediate action. Knowing an arrest would prevent a future return to Taiji, O'Barry turned to the legal weapon in his arsenal: publicity.

## Celluloid as a weapon

O'Barry began surreptitiously filming the fishermen and collecting evidence of the slaughter. He then sent his footage to media outlets around the world.

Meanwhile, Japanese authorities, fishermen – and O'Barry suspects even the local *Yakuza* (Japanese mafia) – embarked on

Director Louie Psihoyos with Charles Hambleton and Joseph Chisholm covertly filming *The Cove* in Japan



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their own campaign of surveillance, police harassment and intimidation to stop him. Such was the level of intimidation he faced in Taiji, O'Barry was often forced to adopt an array of disguises to avoid detection.

"There were times when I felt that my life was in danger," O'Barry told me matter-of-factly.

When one of O'Barry's videos landed on the desk of Louie Psihoyos, renowned photographer and co-founder of the Ocean Preservation Society, the Taiji dolphins gained a valuable ally. With funding from Netscape founder and multimillionaire Jim Clark, Psihoyos assembled a team of film and marine specialists to make a film about Taiji's dolphin industry: *The Cove*. The documentary has received high acclaim at film festivals around the globe, and is tipped for an Oscar.

*The Cove* follows an elite team of activists, filmmakers and freedivers on a covert mission to penetrate Taiji's dolphin industry. What they discovered shocked them, and is now shocking the world.

*The New York Times* review called the film "Very powerful ... Indignant and forceful."

"An astonishing work," said *The National Post* of Canada.

### Popcorn not recommended

When this journalist sat down for a pre-launch screening of *The Cove*, I didn't know what to expect. My documentary film experience hasn't always been positive – perhaps the reason my viewing habits include far too many lots-of-explosions-and-Bruce-Willis-in-a-vest-genre films: their plots may be thinner than a hermit's address book, but they are safely predictable and give one the excuse to consume enough popcorn to stuff a beanbag.

"Most documentaries feel like you're taking your medicine or eating your vegetables, where you know it's good for you but you don't want to do it," *The Cove* Director Louie Psihoyos said during a recent interview with *CNN*, "but this one starts as a thriller and finishes as a thriller. It's a redemption movie, a revenge movie."

*The Cove* isn't a popcorn film. It carries a serious message, woven into an entertaining tapestry of excitement, heartbreak and humour. Scenes – like when the team infiltrated the top-secret cove under cover of darkness to set up their filming equipment – are comparable to Hitchcock's in building suspense. The film is not subtle, and does contain upsetting and sometimes shocking scenes, but these are never gratuitous.

"The incredible thing Louie and [producer] Fisher Stevens have done is to make this great entertainment," O'Barry says. "Audiences laugh and cry, and then they leave the theatre saying 'what can I do?'"

Undoubtedly, the filmmakers have much to be proud of. However it's O'Barry's larger-than-life personality and passion which make *The Cove* cinematic gold.

### Buy Japanese, but maybe give sushi a miss

*The Cove*'s success has brought much-needed publicity to the plight of the Taiji dolphins. Organisations such as Wädenswil-based OceanCare play an important role as well. Together with international charities such as the Animal Welfare Institute, Campaign Whale and The Earth Island Institute, it established [www.savejapandolphins.org](http://www.savejapandolphins.org) to support O'Barry and his fellow activists in the struggle to end the slaughter in Taiji.

OceanCare, responsible for promoting *The Cove* in Switzer-



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Ric O'Barry and Matthew Beattie in Zurich

land, kindly arranged for *Swiss News* to chat with Ric O'Barry after the screening. It is hard to imagine O'Barry is 68 years old. His hair may be silver, but he has no plans to retire anytime soon. At the time of our meeting, he was on a punishing European promotion tour for *The Cove*, yet he showed no signs of tiredness.

I asked whether the situation in Taiji had improved since the filming.

"I was there on September 1 [2009]. We sort of have a temporary victory – maybe ... They have announced that there is now a 'no dolphin slaughter' policy in place. We don't know yet if it's temporary or permanent. [The Taiji dolphin slaughter] was a secret that has now become an international scandal. [The film] is having an impact."

The film receives standing ovations at every film festival it plays, and has won 15 awards, including the coveted Sundance Festival "Audience Award". Most who see it – myself included – ask what they can do to change the situation in Taiji. My immediate reaction was to boycott Japanese products. O'Barry explains why this approach is unfair:

"Besides the practical difficulties this presents, I am opposed to a boycott of Japanese products; it is like an indictment against the Japanese people, the vast majority of whom are innocent and not involved at all with this ... The captures [for dolphinariums] are really the economic underpinning of the dolphin slaughter."

As an animal-lover, I am not a fan of any "entertainment" which exploits animals. I have never been to a dolphinarium, and after meeting Ric O'Barry, I never will.

I will, however, continue to buy Japanese products. Yet after learning about the mercury found in larger sea fish – like tuna – it will be a cold day in hell before I ever touch sushi again.

### Screening room

*The Cove* opens nation-wide on January 14.

Learn more at: [www.thecovemovie.com](http://www.thecovemovie.com) and [www.cineman.ch/en](http://www.cineman.ch/en)

OceanCare: [www.oceancare.org/en](http://www.oceancare.org/en)