

The Cove study guide

by Roger Stitson

Synopsis

In the 1960s, Richard O'Barry was the world's leading authority on dolphin training, working on the set of the popular television program *Flipper*. Day in and day out, O'Barry kept the dolphins working and television audiences smiling. But one day, that all came to a tragic end. *The Cove*, directed by Louie Psihoyos (rhymes with Sequoias), tells the amazing true story of how Psihoyos, O'Barry and an elite team of activists, filmmakers and freedivers embarked on a covert mission to penetrate a hidden cove in Japan, shining light on a dark and deadly secret. The mysteries they uncovered were only the tip of the iceberg.

Curriculum links

This study guide is mainly aimed at middle and upper secondary school levels, with relevance to English, Media Studies, Environmental Studies, Science, Legal Studies, History, SOSE, Ethics, Personal and Interpersonal Development, Business Studies, Economics, Politics.

Background

Before examining important issues and themes raised by a viewing of *The Cove*, and of the nature and structure of the documentary film itself, we should first gain some background knowledge of topics such as: the long history, culture and tradition of the fishing industry in Taiji, in Japan; the history and role of the International Whaling Commission (IWC); and even the world-wide popularity and influence upon audiences of the famous American children's television series, *Flipper*.

Taiji

- Draw a map of Japan (or specifically the Japanese island of Honshu), marking the location of the small town of Taiji, in the prefecture (or governmental district) of Wakayama. (If you have trouble finding it, search Google Maps on the internet.) To place into geographical context, also label Tokyo, Hiroshima, Yokohama, Kobe and Nagoya. Mark the location off the Honshu coast of the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan.
- Carry out appropriate research then write a short history of Taiji's association with whaling, extending back to the sixteenth century. Explain why, in the past, the citizens of the general region have had to rely on whaling for their livelihood and food supply. For example, why hasn't agriculture of the land been a viable local industry? Explain whether the annual dolphin drive is a long-standing traditional event, or whether it is relatively recent.

International Whaling Commission

- Research and write notes on the following:

When and why was the IWC formed? What are the IWC's main activities and objectives today? How many countries currently belong to the IWC? Which countries in the IWC are engaged in whaling and/or the hunting of small cetaceans (sea mammals smaller than large whale species)? Explain whether the IWC can create international maritime laws by members' votes that all world nations are expected to adhere to. If there are such laws, are any penalties in place for breaking them? As a member of the IWC, what is Australia's official position on whaling and the hunting of dolphins in its own ocean territories and elsewhere in the world?

- Create an informative display poster about Australia's history and role as a member of the IWC. Include details as to whether any IWC annual meetings have ever been conducted in Australia.

Australia's own whaling history

- Research and write an informative magazine-style article aimed at young teenagers about Australia's own involvement in the whaling industry, which began in the early years of European colonial settlement, and finished in 1979. Include an explanation of why the industry began, whether it was economically successful, and why it eventually concluded. Also include illustrations, maps and statistical charts as you see fit.
- Connected to the previous activity, you may wish to read Tim Winton's 1986 novel, *Shallows*, which partly examines and fictionalises the effect of the death of the whaling industry on the residents of a coastal town in Western Australia. Discuss in class the issues raised by the novel, and whether it is possible to relate the same themes, in real life, to the residents of Taiji in Japan.

Flipper

- Research and write a listing of the *Flipper* feature films and the television series. Add a brief written description of the general narrative outline of the series, and offer an explanation as to why the series has been so popular, especially with children.
- Find out what 'anthropomorphism' means as it applies to animal life. Make a list of ten other films, fiction television programs, novels or comic books that feature anthropomorphic characters. Discuss anthropomorphism in reference to an understanding of *Flipper*. For example, does it matter if *Flipper* is not true to life? Are its values harmless to children, the bulk of the viewing audience? Will children gain a dangerously wrong impression about dolphin behaviour, characteristics, needs and intelligence from these types of narratives? Should such programs even be produced and screened? Discuss whether there are any positive values for children viewing *Flipper* and other, similar programs. (See activities related to anthropomorphism in the section on 'Dolphin habitat, behaviour and dolphinariums'.)

The 'players'

Carry out the following activities on the central participants appearing in the program:

Some participants

- Discuss in class then write your own commentary on the importance of the following participants to our understanding of *The Cove*. Where relevant, include their relationships or connections to each other:
 - o Richard (Ric) O’Barry
 - o Louie Psihoyos
 - o Joji Morishita
 - o Charles Hambleton
 - o Joe Chisholm
 - o Mandy-Rae Cruickshank and Kirk Krack
 - o Hideki Moronuki
 - o Tetsuya Endo
 - o ‘Private Space’

Ric O’Barry

- During the program Ric O’Barry says, ‘I spent ten years building that industry up [i.e. capturing and training dolphins], and I spent the last thirty-five years trying to tear it down’. Explain the steps, the experiences and the processes in thinking and feeling that Ric O’Barry went through to move from one state of awareness and activity to virtually the opposite. Was it an overnight revelation, or a slow process of discovery and enlightenment?
- From the previous activity, plan and write a short fiction story about someone who experiences a similar change of heart and way of life to that of O’Barry. It does not have to be a serious drama; you may even consider writing a comedy, a melodrama, a social satire. What will be the outcome of the story? Consider the various ways you might narrate the story: in the first person, from the central character’s viewpoint; or from another character’s observations; or in the third person from a ‘god-like’ observational narrative stance.

Joji Morishita

- Find out more about Joji Morishita, Japanese delegate to the IWC at the time *The Cove* was under production. In 2001, Morishita suggested that ‘some people would say it was racism’ for non-whaling countries to single out the Japanese for their whaling activities, when other countries were also whaling. He also referred to ‘cultural imperialism’. (For the full report of these comments, see the first of the web links for ‘Joji Morishita’, in the website references section at the end of this guide.) Do you agree? Explain your views. Why would Morishita make these claims? What does he mean by ‘cultural imperialism’? (Note that the Media Studies section also looks at the issue of racism.)
- Write a set of personal diary entries from Morishita’s viewpoint, as a delegate to an annual sitting of the IWC. Take into consideration the assumption that a personal diary is not likely to be made public.

Louie Psihoyos and Jim Clark

- From the film, write a short commentary on how its director, Louie Psihoyos, first became involved in marine and oceanic environmental issues. Aside from the making of *The Cove*,

what are Psihoyos' other career achievements, and what has he principally been renowned for in the past?

- Following from the previous activity, carry out research on the 'friend' Psihoyos refers to, Jim Clark, in connection with the formation of the Oceanic Preservation Society (OPS). Who is Jim Clark (or rather, James H. Clark)? Write a 350–400 word outline of Clark's career achievements and life story. Discuss Clark's behind-the-scenes involvement in the making of *The Cove*, and whether you think the film could have been produced without his participation. In what sense, for example, is *The Cove* 'A Jim Clark Film', as it states in promotional material and in the film's introductory screen credits?

Business-economic interests and world fishery supplies

The Japanese fisheries supply industry is the largest of its kind in the world. Can it continue to maintain its presence as a business and economic power?

Fisheries

- In pairs or small groups, carry out research then prepare an objectively-based report about the Japanese fisheries supply industry. Examine its extent, size and international power and reach. How much financial revenue does it bring to the Japanese economy? Is it principally a private enterprise, a government-subsidised business or an entirely government-owned monopoly? How many people are directly and indirectly employed within this industry? To what extent are other countries around the world reliant on it? Explain whether the amount of fish harvested from the sea by the Japanese industry has risen, fallen or remained constant over many decades. Has the way in which the fisheries industry operates changed over these decades, especially in terms of harvesting techniques, size and types of boats and the use of equipment?

Consider also the following questions: what are the most important problems facing the industry, and will these problems have an adverse effect on employment and the economy? Does Japan have any viable alternatives to its fishing industries, or can Japan develop new alternatives? What is the likely future for the industry? Can the current methods of ocean fishing and of stock conservation and breeding be altered to make the industry sustainable into the future? Should the rest of the world, for its own benefit, play a positive and constructive role in assisting Japan to adapt from the past to the future? Summing up, what final recommendations would you advise?

Your report should be presented in numbered sections, using sub-headings, and where applicable you may incorporate graphs, charts and other statistical evidence. You should also include a list of print-published, film and web-based references you have drawn from.

Japan and the IWC

- From the film and from further research, write two different accounts of Japan's on-going recruitment of nations to the International Whaling Commission. Present one account as though it were a news or current affairs report either for the Japanese populace or for the populace of one of the recruited nations. Present the second report for a news or current

affairs item designed for a different populace (such as Australia's). Ensure you look closely at the arguments for and against Japan's IWC recruitment activities. (An alternative procedure is to write two opposing letters to the editor of a newspaper.)

'Pest control'

- During the film *Hardy Jones*, the founder of BlueVoice (see website references), claims that the fishermen of Taiji told him, when questioned about the income they derive from the annual dolphin drive, 'It's not about money, it's about pest control'. Assuming his statement and the translation of the fishermen's comments from Japanese into English is correct, discuss in class the way in which the killing of dolphins might be regarded as 'pest control'. Describe and explain your own reaction to the comment. As an audience, is there an emotional overload in hearing and being confronted by these words that outweighs their possible logic?

You may wish to compare or contrast this issue to 'pest control' in Australia, with reference to kangaroos, black swans, camels, foxes, rabbits and other fauna. (Note that while preparing this study guide, the Australian Prime Minister was accused in the USA of being a 'serial killer' for allowing the culling of camels. See 'Camel culling' in website references.)

Seafood as protein source

- Roger Payne, of Ocean Alliance (see website references) says during the film that, 'Seventy per cent of human beings, seven out of ten people, rely as a principal protein on seafood. If we lose access to fish in the sea we will be causing the biggest public health problem human beings have ever faced'.

First find out if you can locate and quote an official or acceptable, scientifically-based source that verifies Payne's comments. Discuss in class why seventy per cent of the world's population relies on seafood for protein, and whether there are practical alternatives to seafood. Is this reliance on seafood entirely of practical necessity and subsistence, or is it mainly a cultural phenomenon? What significance does Payne's claim have for the economic wellbeing of the world's fisheries industry and conservation? Define and describe the types of health problems to which Payne alludes, that would be caused by protein deficiency. Describe the kinds of local and international political and social problems that might arise as a result of extreme health problems due to lack of seafood.

Imagining

- From the scenario and possible outcomes outlined in the previous activity, discuss in class then devise and write a short fiction story designed to publicise and personalise the issue for the wider public. You may write the story in any appropriate mode: human drama, futuristic science fiction, contemporary international political thriller. Also consider such elements as narrative viewpoint, selection of characters, development of character relationships, themes and narrative styling, such as the use of flashback story techniques, or perhaps whether the story could be written as a recorded diary or a series of emails, letters or even newspaper reports.

An alternative may be to work in groups to present a story as a scripted play scenario, with rehearsals to revise and refine the script and to present a reading to the class, or to write, produce and record a performance of the script as designed for sound only.

Environmental activism

During the program we see a number of committed environmental activists such as Ric O'Barry and others, attempting to free captured dolphins.

Definitions

- From the film and from other sources you have looked at, the class is to define the meaning of the term 'environmental activist'. Labels such as 'left wing' and 'Greenie' are sometimes applied by critics and media commentators to environmental activists. Discuss whether such labels are appropriate or helpful in advancing any awareness of environmental issues.

Eco-activists

- Carry out research, then from the film and elsewhere, write a short commentary on each of Captain Paul Watson, Hardy Jones, Dave Rastovich and Roger Payne as environmental activists. What makes them activists? In what ways are they either qualified or knowledgeable in their opinions about the subject of dolphin behaviour or dolphin conservation?
- Footage of Australian actor Isabel Lucas and American actor Hayden Panettiere is included in *The Cove*. Discuss in class their role or purpose in the film. Does the fact that they are glamorous film and television actors, and not qualified environmentalists, add to, detract or even distract from the issues being raised? Does their participation in these activities and their presence in the film itself fulfil any worthwhile purpose?
Imagine that you are one of these two actors, or one similar to them. Write a collection of personal diary entries about your experiences in Taiji, whether it was worthwhile, whether you achieved anything positive, and whether you feel guilty or justified in your actions and behaviour. (Take into consideration that there have been reports that Lucas faces legal charges should she return to Japan, and Panettiere has also claimed a similar charge, later denied by the Japanese Fisheries Agency. See website references on both actors.)
- Early in the film, Ric O'Barry refers to two activists who were murdered. Working in pairs find out more about Jane Tipson and Jenny May, and write a radio current affairs commentary about each woman. What kinds of activities were they involved in, and why? What happened to them? Speculate as to why such extreme violence was taken against them. Have any suspects been questioned by the police, arrested, prosecuted and found guilty in a court of law?
Rehearse and revise your script as required, then record it for playback. You may wish to upload your project recording to your school intranet.
- Following from the previous activity, O'Barry refers to being on a hunger strike with Jenny May. Discuss in the class the aims of and the tactical thinking behind conducting a hunger strike. In what ways is this either similar to, or different from, other kinds of protest action

such as forming human barricades or sabotaging equipment? What effect do media images of these actions, on television or in the newspapers, have on the general populace around the world?

Teamwork

- Discuss the way in which Louie Psihoyos puts together his Taiji operation team. Why does Psihoyos refer to the movie, *Ocean's Eleven* (Lewis Milestone, 1960; Steven Soderbergh, 2001) Make a list of other feature films that he might have evoked. For example, would *The Dirty Dozen* (Robert Aldrich, 1967) be appropriate? What kinds of special skills is Psihoyos looking for among the various team members, and why? Explain whether you would refer to all the team members as 'activists' rather than merely skilled technicians at their particular craft.
- From the previous activity, plan and write a short fiction story where teamwork within an environmental activist group is a vitally important element of plotting. For example, it may be about the stresses and strains within a group, leading to a breakdown in teamwork, or conversely a strengthening in group solidarity. Consider carefully the range of conflicts, characters and character-motivations and behaviour you might incorporate into the story.

Radical activism and ethics

- First, the class should arrive at a satisfactory definition of the term, *radical*, as in 'radical politics' or 'radical activism'. Following this, draw attention to, and discuss in class the various sequences during *The Cove* that present behaviour and actions by committed environmentalists that might be considered unethical or even criminal in some instances. For example, look at the incidence of lying, spying, destroying property, smuggling, neither obeying nor respecting the laws of another country, and trespassing. Discuss whether such behaviour is justified in certain circumstances, or perhaps never justified. Consider the relevance of the statement that 'the end justifies the means'.
- Discuss what you think Japanese citizens might think of Westerners coming into their country and committing actions such as presented in *The Cove*. Try to reverse the situation: how might Australian citizens react if visitors from other countries behaved in a similar way? Take into account aspects such as patriotism, national culture and pride, educated awareness of the issues, the power and influence of the media to either raise the general level of consciousness or to perpetuate a populist attitude within the general community.
- Write two letters to the editor, each of 300–350 words: one praising the Psihoyos team for its activities; the other criticising it.

Does the pot call the kettle black?

- To broaden the issue, discuss in class then write a considered argument examining the question of whether Australia and other western countries are immune from criticism over their own treatment of animals for commercial purposes? Consider such topics as battery hen farming, exporting of live sheep overseas for slaughter, and horse steeplechasing.

Could we be heroes?

- Imagine that the concept of a radicalised environmentalist team, as portrayed in *The Cove*, were to be applied to the plot and narrative of an action movie. Either individually, or in pairs, design a website page or a display poster that presents a particular thematic angle, message or emotive point of view about the team. Consider use of colour, placement, angle and sizing of image and text to attract audience attention. For example, would the imagery of heroism be appropriate? (Note that *The Cove* concludes with David Bowie's, 'We Can Be Heroes' on the soundtrack; see more on this in the Media Studies section.)

Dolphin habitat, behaviour and dolphinariums

A central argument developed through *The Cove* is that for physiological reasons dolphins cannot adapt to dolphinariums, particularly of the amusement park variety.

Food chain and mercury poisoning

- Before looking closely at the ways in which dolphins either adapt or do not adapt to particular salt-water environments, explain what Roger Payne means by his statement in the film that, 'people and dolphins feed at the same level in the food chain'. Draw an illustrated chart of a 'food chain' that demonstrates Payne's comment. Explain how and why dolphins in their ocean element can acquire high levels of mercury due to their position in the food chain. Where does this mercury come from, and how does it enter the food chain? Show this on your chart.

Dolphin communications

- From viewing the film, and from further examination of the issue, discuss in class and make notes on the ways in which dolphins are suited to living in natural ocean environments, and the methods by which they communicate with each other in those environments. How do they react to noise? Why is it that they suffer from nervous stress if barricaded or fenced in within those environments? In what way is their sound perception, as suggested by O'Barry, 'their downfall in Taiji'?

O'Barry and Dolphinariums

- Discuss and explain why the trapping and use of dolphins in amusement park aquariums is a profitable business.
- What is the problem that Ric O'Barry identifies when he claims that the dolphin's smile is 'nature's greatest deception'? Is he being overly emotive or is there an objective truth to his comments? Do dolphins smile? (See related issues on this topic in the Media Studies section.)
- Following from the previous discussion, O'Barry relates his experience from years earlier when Kathy, one of his *Flipper* dolphins, 'committed suicide in my arms'. Comment on the circumstances of Kathy's death. How and why did it occur? Carry out research to verify whether experts on dolphin behaviour support O'Barry's view with any evidence that dolphins deliberately and consciously stop breathing in order to die.

Medication

- During the film O'Barry says, '... in these fish houses [at places such as Miami Sea World], you'll see bottles of Maalox and Tagamet.' Find out what these medicinal aids are normally used for, and whether they have any health side effects. What claims does O'Barry make about Maalox and Tagamet in relation to dolphins? From further research are we able to verify the truth of these claims?

Promotions, viewpoints, stories

- Plan and create two promotional display posters. One should promote the 'star' attractions at a Sea World style of dolphinarium, and when daily/nightly performances take place. It should be aimed at families with young children. The second poster should be a public awareness promotion aimed at the same audience, produced by an environmentalist or animal cruelty group aiming to highlight the issues surrounding the treatment of dolphins in dolphinariums.
- Write a letter to the editor of a large daily newspaper, in 300–350 words, expressing your own personal viewpoint about dolphin aquarium displays and public performances. To influence, shock, inform or educate your potential readers, use a range of argumentative-persuasive techniques to present your case.
- Taking into account what you have learnt from the film, plan and write a fiction short story about a dolphin that is captured and taken to a sea aquarium and placed on display in front of large crowds (as shown in *The Cove*). You may wish to take an experimental approach by narrating the story from the dolphin's viewpoint. Consider your choice of other characters (human and animal), conflict situations, plot development, climax and conclusion, expression of themes, and whether the story is to be a serious 'issues-based' drama or not. You may also think about whether your story could suitably be pitched at an audience of readers between eight and twelve years old. If aimed at young readers, consider including illustrations.

Media studies

Carry out the following activities.

- Did you find *The Cove* to be an entertaining documentary? Did you follow its arguments or were you confused? Were you left feeling that you wanted more, or was its 96-minute length satisfactory? Discuss, drawing on examples from the film to support your views.
- Discuss in class then write your own commentary of *The Cove* as to whether it presents an objective or subjective presentation and viewpoint of its subject. For example, does the camera 'take sides'? Does the film allow the audience to think for itself, and to draw its own conclusions, or does it manipulate audience reaction and emotion? Does it support opinion with evidence? Assess one possible interpretation that it reduces particular groups and individuals referred to, or participating in the film, to simplistic polar opposites of good and evil, heroes and villains. Through the range of filmmaking techniques presented, are we overtly manipulated into accepting uncritically the film's version of truth? Does the film educate, does it enlighten us, or does it 'preach to the converted'? Provide examples from the film that support your opinions.

- Discuss *The Cove* as a documentary film whose narrative is structured in ways similar to a fiction thriller movie. Look at narrative development, sequencing, build-up of tension and drama, climactic moments and denouement, editing techniques and use of soundtrack mood-enhancing music.
- Following from the previous activity, write a commentary on the purpose and effect of the two songs on the soundtrack: ‘Smile, Even Though Your Heart is Aching’, and ‘We Can be Heroes’, ensuring that you refer to their placement in the narrative in juxtaposition with the on-screen images accompanying them. In other words, does the music enhance the image; do the images enhance the meaning and emotional impact of the music and lyrics?
- Analyse in detail the climactic sequence approaching the film’s conclusion beginning at the point where Ric O’Barry enters a meeting of the IWC with his filmed evidence of activities at Taiji. How is this sequence enhanced by camera movement, editing and sound? What is the purpose of the fast-motion scene of O’Barry standing still in the street, surrounded by a rushing city crowd?
- Discuss in class then write a commentary as to whether *The Cove*, an American-produced film, could be accused of being racist and anti-Japanese, or of promoting an anti-Japanese response and national stereotyping from western viewing audiences. Consider, for example, the purpose of the vox pop sequence in the film, where Japanese citizens in Tokyo are interviewed about eating dolphin meat. Do you think it is sympathetic to them or not? Also look at the website references to ‘Ric O’Barry and *The Cove*’ for O’Barry’s comments about Japanese citizens and American-Japanese people.
- Following from the previous activity, carry out research and write a short appraisal of how *The Cove* is regarded and discussed in Japan by film critics, the general populace and mass media commentators, politicians, the fisheries business and fisheries unions, and eco-activist groups.
- At the end of the film, during the final credits, we see some updated information, or ‘postscripts’, on the screen. Comment on their purpose and their effect on viewers. What is your opinion of the way Hideki Moronuki had a hair sample taken from him on-camera? Who do you think took this sample? (Note the clothing; clues may be found earlier in the film.) Discuss whether the filmmakers belittled him, or whether you think they were justified. Did you find this scene confronting or not? Discuss whether the conclusion to the film is really a conclusion or not.
- Prepare and write a film review of *The Cove* for the arts pages of a daily or weekly newspaper.

References and further resources

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