

Diving Deep

Jacques Cousteau meets James Bond in a documentary eco-thriller about a group of activists going undercover in an obscure Japanese coastal town to uncover a bizarre, billion-dollar industry threatening the world's dolphin stocks. **Vicki James Yiannias** delves into the inspiration behind *The Cove*, a potent film by photographer Louis Psihoyos.

At the beginning of *The Cove*, a film directed by Louis Psihoyos about the annual capture and slaughter of dolphins in a sheltered lagoon at Taiji, a small seaside town in Japan, anthropologist Margaret Mead is quoted, saying, “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

The small group of thoughtful, committed citizens who undertook the perilous operation of filming *The Cove* in Taiji, “a town with a terrible secret”, in the face of threats from town authorities have set in motion the wheels of ethical environmental change against the captive dolphin market and the massacre of more than 2,100 dolphins annually in Japan for public consumption despite their toxically high levels of mercury.

Released in September, Psihoyos’s film raised international outcry against the Taiji practice of dolphin capture and slaughter. On September 10 it was officially announced that in response to public pressure Taiji fishermen would release dolphins captured for amusement parks. As well, an anonymous announcement stated that the usual subsequent slaughter of the remaining dolphins would not take place this year.

A provocative mix of investigative journalism, eco-adventure, and arresting imagery in special visual style identified with Psihoyos—at fifty-two, one of the top ten photographers in the world—*The Cove* is the first movie of the Oceanic Preservation Society (OPS), a nonprofit organization which he co-founded.

Shortly after the film’s release and the announcement that unsold captured dolphins will be released by Taiji fisherman this year instead of being slaughtered, Psihoyos said he saw this as “a mixed success”.

“I’m thrilled that these dolphins won’t be killed, resulting in less mercury-tainted meat on the market in Japan but the ideal scenario would be that no wild dolphins are not captured at all.”

He acknowledges, though, that the announcement may be just the start of the film’s impact and influence.

“We’re getting important press coverage in Japan. The whole



country is being shamed into changing. We’re applying *gaiatsu*, which means ‘external pressure’ in Japanese. I hope the government is absolutely shamed. I hope the Minister of Health gets fired; the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare recommends that pregnant women eat bottlenose dolphin—I saw them buying it in Japan—which can have anywhere from five to five thousand times more mercury than is allowed by Japanese law. That’s going to be a big issue in Japan.”

One of the first benefits arising from *The Cove*, as cited in the film, is that the direct action of two Taiji town councilmen, Yamashita and Ryono, resulted in the removal of dolphin meat from Taiji’s school lunch program.

“The sad part is that Yamashita’s kids were ostracized at school and he was run out of town for standing up for this issue, and I think that the same thing may have happened to Ryono. But I think that ultimately they’ll be regarded as heroes. It can only be hoped that the value of what they did and the value of what I do will be recognized eventually. But it’s important to separate who we’re actually declaring the bad guy here,” says Psihoyos. “Most of Taiji’s townspeople are not related to the dolphin industry. They’re really nice and very honest.”

But there’s more he’d like to see happen.

“First, I’d like to see the cove shut down...I think that’s an achievable goal. And I’d like people to question the educational benefit of going to a dolphin show. Jacques Cousteau said that the educational benefit of watching a dolphin in captivity is about

the same as learning about humanity by observing a prisoner in solitary confinement. When wild intelligent and sentient animals are captured and forced to do tricks for our casual amusement it says more about our intelligence than theirs.”

He adds: “At the next level, I would love to see people understand that it’s not just dolphins and whales that are toxic, it’s everything that we like to eat. The way we’re getting our energy, we’re polluting the planet in a massive way. Mankind is doing what no wild animal will do, we’re fouling our own nest. We’re living in a science fiction nightmare right now and people don’t realize it. What’s going on in Japan is a microcosm of what’s going on in the rest of the world. In fact, that’s how I see *The Cove*; it’s just a metaphoric way to look at a much bigger topic.”

To draw attention to these issues, in addition to the theater release of *The Cove*, Psihoyos is involved in organizing a series of international exhibitions of photographs shot underwater. The exhibitions, he believes, can help make the Oceanic Preservation Society a powerful agent against the destruction of ocean species.

“We have a very simple goal at OPS. Our motto is, ‘we’re not trying to save the whole planet, just seventy per cent of it’. Our purpose is to create awareness about the environment and to encourage people to save the oceans.”

Despite its difficult subject, *The Cove*, which Psihoyos has described as an ‘action adventure documentary’ is entertaining. The covert operations crew are quite funny and the entire documentary is so gorgeously filmed that even the grisly massacre of dolphins in a blood-red sea is riveting.

“Some people who haven’t seen it think it’s just a dolphin slaughter, but I think that part is so tastefully done. And I find the film uplifting. At the end it feels like one person can make a difference and a couple of us together can maybe change the world. We’re getting some steam up on this.”

The Cove also highlighted differences in how dolphins are viewed in Western and Japanese culture.

“The Greeks, ancient and present, esteem this mythical creature, legendary for saving the lives of human beings. Not so the Japanese. The Japanese word for dolphin is translated as ‘hog-fish’. Taiji residents see the dolphin hunt as a tradition no different than killing other animals for food. How is it that one culture can revere an animal and another culture despises it? Dolphins are very intelligent. Somebody asked me ‘why should we care about dolphins?’ My answer was that the dolphin’s brain has more convolutions, more area for sensory receptors. They’re more sensitive than we are. They’ve been on the planet with a bigger brain than ours for 55 million more years. I’m just glad they don’t have the ability to have the power over us to say, ‘what value are humans?’ That’s a tragic irony, that we big-brained creatures, we humans, ask, ‘what good is a dolphin?’, when we’re the most destructive species in the history of the planet. We’re going through the sixth major extinction now, but it’s human-caused. My next movie will be about that.”

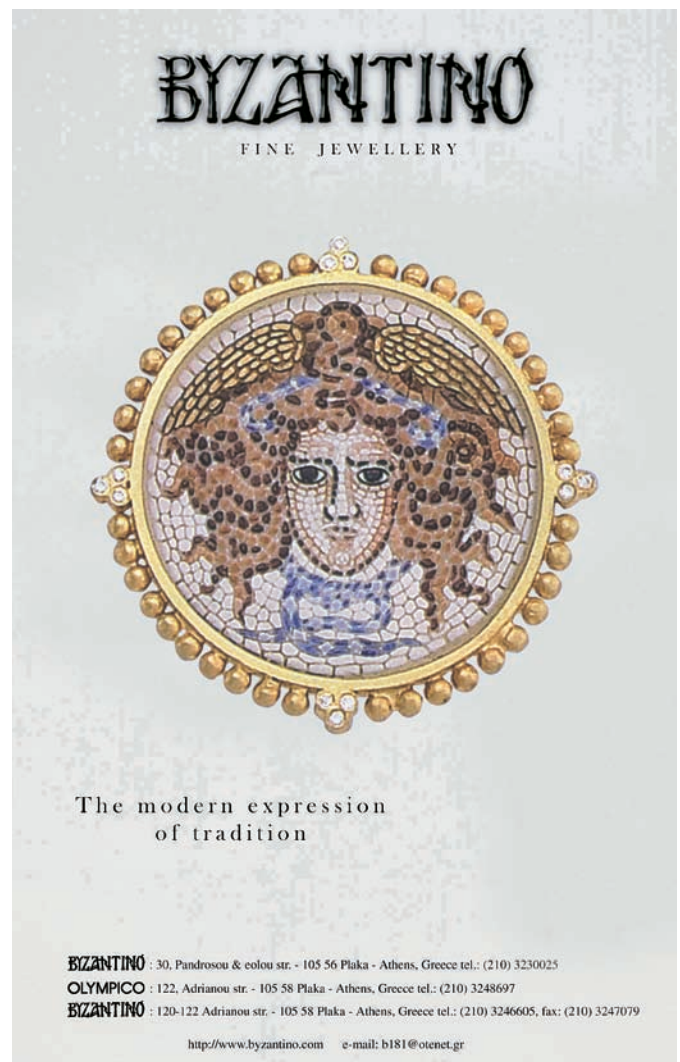
Psihoyos began his career as a photographer and was the first still photographer hired by National Geographic, hired before

finishing college. That collaboration lasted for about eighteen years. During that time, he developed a distinct style in his photographic essays.

“I wanted to work for Geographic since I was about fourteen, but everyone said, ‘you’re crazy; everyone wants to work there but nobody ever does’,” he recalls. “My specialty was really unusual subjects...difficult subjects. I did stories on trash...on smell—how do you photograph a smell—and stories on sleep and dreams.”

Trash and smell and dreams are unusual subjects for a photo essay. Psihoyos says he decided on them largely led by a sense of humor.

“I’d do the more unusual stories because they took more imagination than intrinsic topics, like spectacular scenery, or optimistic stories like ‘Walk Across America’, about someone walking across America to find a real American. Bill Douthitt, who also worked at Geographic, and I would think of our own kind of crazy stories, like Bulldozer Across America.... the storyboard would show a bulldozer going through a national park. Once we were watching a cleaning lady drag trash across the lunch floor of Geographic and I said how about a story on trash, because Ge-



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ographic is always doing stories about gold, silver, platinum...and Douthitt said, 'like a scientist studying the garbage of modern culture'. We proposed the idea of garbage art and they took it up but I had to spend the next nine months trying to make garbage look like art. That's basically how I got started there."

As for his interest in the sea, he credits Jacques Cousteau and his documentaries, which Psihoyos saw as a kid.

"It was so exciting to see this other world. Diving is the most miraculous thing I've ever done. I started in 1975. It's like living in an alternative universe."

Psihoyos has published *Hunting Dinosaurs* and co-authored *Athena—A Classic Schooner for Modern Times*. He has also been the subject of several books about the work of National Geographic photographers. Having established himself as a photographer and making new professional inroads in film, it seems at times that Psihoyos is living a dream himself ("Yeah, sometimes I've got to pinch myself to realize that this is real") but he has the rare fortune to be doing something of universal importance but also having fun.

"Oh my God, is it fun. The big difference between a job and a career is that with a job you look at your watch, and in a career there's not enough time in the day. I've got the best career in the world."

He adds: "For me, it's always been about learning, but making this movie has been one of the most profound experiences of my life...to see people moved by something like I was. In still photography it's very difficult, I'd say nearly impossible, to transfer emotion to other people in that way. In the festival circuit people were laughing, or crying, or cheering. And afterwards they're asking what they can do to help. That's the most you can hope for out of a movie. But it's one thing to make a film—so far we've won fourteen international awards—but to me, that's collateral; we're trying to achieve the goal of saving the ocean."

Is there still time to save the oceans?

"I feel like we've only got a couple of decades to turn things around before it's really too late, so to me, the real goal of the Oceanic Preservation Society is to light the fire of younger peo-

ple, to inspire them to become involved, active, to take responsibility for their actions. An example I give is that when you stay at a friend's house you try to leave the place better than you found it, and then you get invited back. But we're doing the opposite with the planet, and what I think we need to impart to the next generation is to try to live in a way that's sustainable, and I don't think we're doing it. Every generation is adapting to this diminishment. We don't realize what we've lost because the last generation didn't stand up for it. It's a shame. To me, it's a great tragedy.

Today Psihoyos lives in Boulder, Colorado, with his wife and two sons. He grew up in Mississippi, an experience he says had a great effect on his life.

"My friends and I were the first ones to go out on the river as soon as the ice broke; we'd water ski between the ice floes. In the summer we'd go island hopping and exploring on a 24' Kris Kraft cabin cruiser; we'd park the boat in a little inlet and hang out in some backwater areas where there were tree swings. I took off a year off from college and worked on the barges and at the Pillsbury grain terminal. It was an interesting part of my life that's hard to romanticize because it was a lot of work, but yes, because of the Mississippi River I felt I had a connection to the ocean, although I didn't really see the ocean until I was sixteen years old. I had only seen the tri-state area, Iowa, Illinois, and Wisconsin, but as soon as I got my driver's license I took off. I wanted to see the world."

In one scene in *The Cove*, there's a picture of Charles Hamilton, the documentary's director of covert operations, that Psihoyos took when they were both standing atop the world's tallest building. In the film, Psihoyos can be heard saying "I'm afraid of heights". This, he says, is because his father fell from a roof and was killed when Psihoyos was just eight years old.

"Everybody has an image of his or her father being a really strong guy, but when I went to Sparta I found out it was true. He was legendary in his village. The villagers remember that he was able to load 100-kilo sacks of olives onto a donkey."

Psihoyos has been to Sparta twice.

"My maternal grandfather's village is about five kilometers from there," he says. "I loved Greece. I guess it's in my blood. I love the food. I love the environment. I love the people; they're very warm and gracious."

His Greek heritage is also something he identified with growing up in Dubuque.

"I took six years of Greek school, but it never did take hold, but I felt what it was like to be born a Greek American. I felt an enormous amount of love and a lot of camaraderie in the community and I think that's what kids are missing now more than anything, that sort of sense of belonging, and I really had that. I always felt like I had love of family, and just by virtue of being Greek I felt I had a community. I think the Greeks got it right. Historically they had a really good sense of what culture meant."