

## FEATURES

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From Flipper's keeper to  
activist

Ric O'Barry made his name capturing and training the dolphins for the 'Flipper' television series. But after one of them died in his arms, O'Barry has since dedicated his life to saving dolphins and whales

BY CATHERINE SHU  
STAFF REPORTER

Since US documentary *The Cove* won an Oscar last month, Ric O'Barry's journey from dolphin trainer to activist has become known throughout the world. He was the lead trainer on the hit 1960s TV series *Flipper*, which spawned a craze for dolphin performances at amusement parks like SeaWorld. But after one of the dolphins he had trained died in his arms, O'Barry dedicated his life to keeping dolphins out of captivity. He now travels around the world, rescuing dolphins, protesting against hunts and drives and earning the ire of fishermen, trainers and, occasionally, other activists.

O'Barry's work in Taiji, Japan was the focus of *The Cove*, which premieres in Taiwan this week at the Urban Nomad Film Festival. Directed by Louie Psihoyos, the film brought international attention to the yearly dolphin drive in the coastal town, one of the largest suppliers of dolphins to aquariums and amusement parks around the world (including in Taiwan). Dolphins not sent into captivity are slaughtered and their meat sold for consumption, despite containing high levels of mercury. But the film has only been shown so far at a handful of theaters and film festivals in Japan; a screening last week at a US Air Force base was canceled after protests outside the Japanese distributor's office. (O'Barry wants the film released online for free with Japanese subtitles.)

Advocating for dolphins is in many ways a path of redemption for O'Barry. While on leave from the US Navy in 1955, O'Barry visited the Miami Seaquarium in his hometown. "I saw the dolphins in the tank underwater and I said, 'When I get out of the Navy, I'm going to come back here,'" he remembers. Five years later, he did just that, capturing dolphins for the Seaquarium. O'Barry then joined the *Flipper* crew, training the five dolphins that shared the title role.

While working on the series, O'Barry says he began to realize dolphins were self-aware and keeping them in captivity was morally inexcusable. But it wasn't until one of the dolphins, Cathy, swam into his arms and, he says, committed suicide by closing her blowhole (dolphins are voluntary breathers) that he felt compelled to act.

O'Barry returns to Taiji five or six times a year, but Japan represents just one part of his work. "If there's a dolphin in trouble, anywhere in the world, my phone will ring," he says. At the time of this interview last week, O'Barry had just come back from the Solomon Islands, where his activities included convincing tribes on Malaita island to replace dolphin hunting with beekeeping and other ventures.

He says he also tried to find other forms of subsidy for the Taiji fishermen, but they turned him down, claiming the dolphin hunt is a form of

"pest control." The Japanese government, O'Barry says, told the fishermen that dolphins are the main reason for dwindling stocks of fish, instead of overfishing by humans.

O'Barry blames the Japanese government — which continues whaling in the face of pressure from other nations and the International Whaling Commission — for a "media blackout" about dolphin hunting in Japan and the high levels of mercury in the marine mammal's meat.

In an interview with the *Taipei Times*, O'Barry talked about why stopping dolphin hunts is more than just an animal rights and environmental issue, the charges of cultural imperialism that have been leveled against his activism and *The Cove*, and why he thinks the Japanese public needs to see the film.

**Taipei Times:** In *The Cove*, you said that at one point while you were working on *Flipper* you were buying a new Porsche every year, you'd become successful and it wasn't until Cathy died that you decided you weren't going to support dolphins being in captivity. But I'm curious about what direction your life would have taken if Cathy hadn't died in your arms.

**RO:** I would probably be making five million [US] dollars a year at my own dolphin swim program somewhere in the Bahamas. I could do that today if I wanted to. There's nothing stopping me from getting an investor and opening up my own dolphin park. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night, though. When I realized during *Flipper* that dolphins are self-aware, I didn't do anything about it. I was aware of it but I didn't do anything about it until Cathy committed suicide. That's when I walked away from the industry and launched a campaign to try to educate people with the message "don't buy a ticket." That's really the solution to the problem. The industry is based on supply and demand like any other product. If people in Taiwan stopped buying tickets to see dolphin shows, dolphins wouldn't be captured in Taiji and sent to Taiwan.

**TT:** There's footage of you standing on a busy intersection [Shibuya Scramble in Tokyo] with a TV screen strapped to you. What were you showing and how did people react?

**RO:** It was the most graphic footage [of the dolphin slaughter in Taiji], more graphic than what you saw in *The Cove*. When you are looking at *The Cove*, you are looking at the Disney version. There is throat-cutting [in the footage O'Barry shows], I mean, it's really, really graphic. I interviewed 100 people in Ginza walking down the sidewalk randomly. I showed them the footage and asked them if they knew this is

happening in their country. Not one of them knew it. How is that possible?

So when you ask me about a media cover-up, obviously it's covered up. There is a media blackout on all whale and dolphin stories and that, I think, is illegal. I say that because Article 21 of the Japanese constitution [which protects the right to assembly and speech] guarantees them the right to this information and yet they are not given this information. That is why I think it is so important to show *The Cove* in Japan for free, in Japanese.

**TT:** I thought one of the most interesting arguments *The Cove* made was that the dolphin slaughter is not just an environmental or animal welfare issue, but that it's also a consumer rights issue with the dolphin meat being mislabeled and containing high levels of mercury.

**RO:** Exactly. If you talk to fishermen in Taiji, they will tell you that Ric O'Barry is a cultural imperialist and this is our culture, our tradition. But we now know that [dolphin meat] is contaminated and we know for sure that they continue to sell it and that they are aware it is contaminated. That takes it out of the arena of animal rights and puts it in the arena of human rights. You can go to a supermarket and find packages of cigarettes that are labeled "this is dangerous," but most of the dolphin meat has higher levels of mercury than the fish that killed all of those people in Minamata [a Japanese town that suffered high levels of mercury poisoning and neurological disease after wastewater from a Chisso Corporation factory was dumped into its bay] in the 1950s.

**TT:** One of the other criticisms I've seen about the film besides cultural imperialism is that it's ethnocentric because there is dolphin hunting going on in other countries, including the Faroe Islands. I know you have traveled all over the world, to wherever dolphins are hunted, but why did *The Cove* focus on Taiji?

**RO:** I'm not one of the filmmakers. I happened to be there and working on the cove in Taiji and trying to figure out a way to abolish it, but I am as concerned about [other countries with dolphin hunts] ... Regarding the Faroe Islands, my wife is Danish and she's going over there in a few days. We have a mandate, the Earth Island Institute [where O'Barry works as a marine mammal specialist], to protect dolphins and whales worldwide. It's not just Japan, the filmmakers happened to make a movie about Japan and the cove. You would have to ask them about their motivations.

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— Ric O'Barry, activist and former dolphin trainer for the television series 'Flipper,' on what he would be doing now if one of the show's dolphins had not have died in his arms



Far left: Fishermen load a boat with slaughtered dolphins at a cove in Taiji, Japan.

PHOTOS: AFP AND COURTESY OF RIC O'BARRY AND URBAN NOMAD