

Louie Psihoyos

Greek American uncovers what may be the largest health crisis of our planet

The Cove is 's documentary indictment of the Japanese dolphin trade, in which the mammals are herded – the preferred sold to Western aquariums (for \$150,000) and the rest slaughtered, with their mercury-tainted meat then fed to an unsuspecting Japanese public. Much of the graphic violence was shot with hidden cameras, planted by Psihoyos and his crew the night before a dolphin slaughter.

Please introduce yourself...

My name is Louie Psihoyos and I began my career as a still photographer for National Geographic Magazine working right out of college. I always been respectful of the great filmmakers and most of my lighting techniques for my still stories have come from studying the films and reading books on the great cinematographers. My motivation to become a filmmaker was inspired by my good friend and dive buddy Jim Clark. When Jim was in college he helped set up the computers that sent man to the moon, teaching college at Stanford he created the 3-D graphics engine and started Silicon Graphics which ushered in cad-cam and movies like "Jurassic Park." He then started the first commercial internet browser, Netscape

How or what prompted the idea for your film and how did it evolve?

Jim has achieved great success using his genius to look into the future and seeing patterns for business opportunities – he's also great about recognizing patterns of ecological decline. We have been diving together about 10 years but both of us have been diving for decades before that and we've been witnessing the degradation of the oceans in our lifetime. We are losing the reefs and sea life at an enormous rate. We both felt incredible sadness to go back to these places we called paradise and see them reduced to rubble from dynamiting, bleaching and overfishing. When Jim mentioned to me that somebody should do something about the problems facing the oceans I suggested "How about you and I?" We started the Oceanic Preservation Society about 4 years ago, a non-profit foundation with the intent of making documentary films and still projects about vanishing ocean life because we're losing them fast. Our motto is we're not trying to save the whole planet, just 70% of it.

How did you learn the "craft" of filmmaking?

"The Cove" is OPS's first documentary. Still photography and making a film are similar for me in that I am always trying to find iconic images and stories that define bigger truths. The director John Ford said that making a film is like painting a picture with an army. And we needed a special kind of army to make "The Cove."

Please elaborate a bit on your approach to making "The Cove"...

My first photo assistant went on to become the head mold maker at Industrial Light and Magic (now called Kerner Optical) and in between making "Pirates of the Caribbean" and "Evan Almighty" I persuaded them to take up our cause and make fake rocks to hide high definition cameras and microphones. To get past guards and police we used diversionary techniques and military grade high definition cameras. Some of my pirate buddies from my days living in the islands helped get the fake rocks into the cove. They had nerves of steel and hearts of gold and their bravery really paid off in the end with footage that I think is some of the most powerful imagery ever shot. World champion freedivers Mandy-Rae Cruickshank and her trainer husband Kirk Krack helped us set underwater cameras



and hydrophones. The only person on our team with military experience was Simon Hutchins, an electronics genius with the Canadian Air Force who helped us create an unmanned drone with a gyro-stabilized camera below it and a Blimp with a high definition camera. We also had the help of DNA scientist Scott Baker who set up a portable DNA laboratory in a Tokyo hotel room. Also helping us was a team of surfers led by Dave Rasta Rastovich. Simon quipped, "We're all professionals, just not at filmmaking." But then, "The Cove," is not like any documentary anybody has seen before.

What were some of the biggest challenges you faced in developing the project?

The film we made was a result of watching too many Jacques Cousteau specials and James Bond films as a child. Four years ago, through Jim, I met

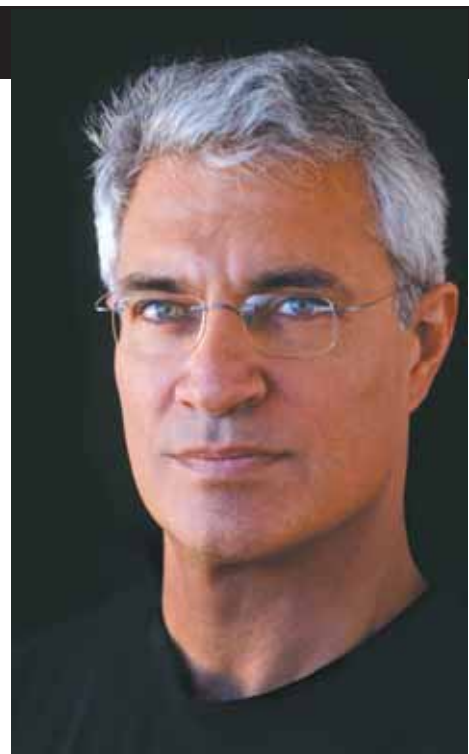
Steven Spielberg. The great film maker advised me (from his experience with "Jaws") to never make a movie on boats or with animals so I was forewarned of the challenge ahead but now I could add this advice for any fledgling filmmaker: never make a movie where the subjects of your film want to kill you and you have to work in the middle of the night to break the law while the police are on your tail. But such was the making of The Cove. We had to evade 24-hour police surveillance in a foreign country to make



this film, so the conditions for the last 4 years have been extremely stressful to say the least. A measure of our success is that we escaped detection yet now there are arrest warrants issued for us should we return. We have had death threats.

We had never planned on putting the OPS team in the movie but when we started viewing the covert footage of the OPS team getting past the guards and police we found the footage to be a very compelling part of the story. A good friend of mine in Colorado, Hunter Thompson told me to never be afraid to become part of the story and I guess this film is one way that we are helping to carry on his legacy by creating a new genre of documentary film making.

It's an action adventure documentary about activists deciding to uncover a dark secret hidden away in a secret cove in Japan. But our involvement in the creation of the film is one of five parts of the film that weave together to tell a much larger story. Our central character is Ric O'Barry who captured and trained the five female dolphins who collectively played the part of Flipper for the popular TV series. After the main Flipper dolphin, Cathy, committed suicide in his arms (dolphins are not automatic air-breathers) Ric began a life-long crusade for redemption by trying to free captive dolphins around the world. His story humanizes our call to action and weaves



around the ineffectual bureaucracy of the International Whaling Commission, which has the authority to mandate small cetacean protection, but doesn't exercise it because of loopholes and systematic vote-buying by whaling countries. The bigger story for all of us is that dolphins and people are at the top of the food-chain and if you eat seafood, whether it is tuna or Flipper you are getting massive doses of toxins like mercury, which are rising about 3% a year through the burning of fossil fuels. Coal contains mercury which is the most toxic non-radioactive element in the world.

In China alone, there is a new coal-fired power plant scheduled to be built every week for the next 20 years. Roger Payne, also one of the characters in our film, tells us that because these toxins bio-accumulate in the meat of top predators, dolphins and whales have become, "Swimming toxic dump sites." Many of the world's top scientist feel that the pandemic of cancers and diseases may be related to the accumulation of POP's, persistent organic pollutants, in the environment.

OPS is headquartered in Boulder, Colorado may seem an unusual place for an ocean-based organization but we like to say we're conveniently located between two oceans. When we took an assessment of what the carbon cost of this film was, we were quite shocked, 646 tons. Lots of gear. Lots of travel. We turned the studio as green as we could as soon as we could to start offsetting the carbon debt. We installed 117 solar panels (a 23 Kilowatt system) on our headquarters and I bought fully electric cars for local transportation, a Zenn NEV (Neighborhood Electric Vehicle) and a Toyota RAV EV which goes 80 miles an hour and about 120 miles on a single charge – and all powered from the sun. We call it a VUS, Vehicle Using Sun, which is the opposite of a SUV.

What are your personal goals as a filmmaker?

"The Cove" is a film whose story begins with the adventure of exposing the horrors of a secret cove but escalates to reveal a larger secret that touches us all, one that governments are covering up. My goal was to create a film that would be extremely entertaining, a visual tour de force with a powerful environmental message and a captivating intellectually stimulating story line. I will gauge its success by the amount of people that come out of the theater feeling transformed and empowered to change.