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info@arkandtent.com[Home](#)[Articles Index](#)[Travel Articles](#)[World Beat](#)[Helping Hands](#)[Pet Projects](#)[Field Notes](#)[Trips & Tours](#)[Reader's Corner](#)[Newsletter](#)[About Us](#)**RIC O'BARRY*****Fixing Flipper - The Journey of a Dolphin Activist*****By Erin Caslavka**

It's hard to imagine now, but 40 years ago some of the only "interaction" we had with animals (other than the family pet) was via television. And in many of those TV shows, animals like Lassie and the equine Mr. Ed were anthropomorphized into our collective vision of how *we* thought *they* felt.



Back in the 1960s, Richard (Ric) O'Barry, working for the Miami Seaquarium, took several dolphins from the wild and trained five of them to play the role of "Flipper" in the popular television series of the same name. The show, and the five dolphins who played Flipper, were an instant hit. Flipper swam "his" way right into our hearts as week-after-week we watched the loyalty, bravery and humor he brought to the lives of his adopted TV family.

But something happened along the way: O'Barry began to notice an unhappiness amongst his animal actors, culminating in what he believes was the suicide of Cathy, one of his trained dolphins.

"You have to understand," said O'Barry in a 2009 interview, "dolphins are not automatic air breathers like we are. Every breath for them is a conscious effort. She looked me right in the eye, took a breath, held it - and she didn't take another one. She just sank to the bottom of the water. That had a profound effect on me."

On the first Earth Day in 1970, O'Barry found his second calling: creating The Dolphin Project, an organization dedicated to freeing captive dolphins.

"Dolphins are free-ranging, intelligent, and complex wild animals, and they belong in the oceans, not playing the clown in our human schemes," notes O'Barry on The Dolphin Project website. So over the course of several years, he felt compelled to free 14 of them living in captivity.

As you might imagine, his actions weren't always greeted with an enthusiastic welcome. Many people in the billion-dollar animal entertainment industry were

openly hostile towards him and considered his tactics illegal and threatening. To that, O'Barry has responded, "They're in this for the money. Take it away, and they'll quit."

But as O'Barry was soon to discover, another more insidious story lay behind the trade and trafficking of captive dolphins. And once O'Barry realized what was going on, he founded a different organization with the purpose of not just releasing captive dolphins, but to keep them from ever being taken from the wild in the first place.

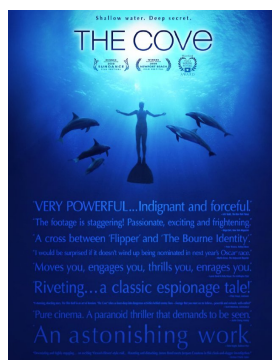
Save Japan Dolphins (SJD) is the result of that desire. As its Campaign Director, O'Barry undertook the challenge of stopping the kidnapping of dolphins from the wild (in a remote part of Japan called Taiji) for sale to amusement parks, and the subsequent slaughter of those that weren't wanted. As he notes on the SaveJapanDolphins.org site, "Most people in Japan don't have any idea that (a) dolphin slaughter is even happening. If we can spread the word around the world - and especially in Japan - we can expose the secret of Taiji and force the Japanese government to stop it."



As anyone knows, exposing corrupt business practices (or the inhumane treatment of others) is best achieved via vital media outlets; and one of those outlets is the movie theater.

O'Barry partnered with Louie Psihoyos, executive director of the Oceanic Preservation Society (OPS), and the rest is cinematic history. Working covertly to film the rounding up, selling off, and slaughtering of bottlenose dolphins in Taiji, the movie that resulted from their undercover trips to Japan is *The Cove*. The Oscar-winning film has raised public awareness on a host of issues: the "dirty side" of the captive dolphin business; mercury poisoning in marine mammals and where the butchered meat ends up; the health of the world's oceans; and the annual dolphin slaughter in Taiji.

The Cove started reaching bigger and bigger audiences, and - with petitioning efforts - was also screened at the Tokyo Film Festival. As a result of the increase in media attention, as well as the support that OPS and SJD have received, *The Cove* has had the positive impact on the city of Taiji calling for a temporary ban on the annual dolphin drive off their coast.



What began as one man's relationship with five trained dolphins continues today with his crusade to end our view of these magnificent creatures as animals simply put here for our collective amusement.

FAST FACTS

Save Japan Dolphins

www.savejapandolphins.org

Oceanic Preservation Society

www.opsociety.org

The Dolphin Project

www.thedolphinproject.org

Photo credits: iStockphoto.com; the Archives of Richard O'Barry

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