

Annie Leonard Talks Trash

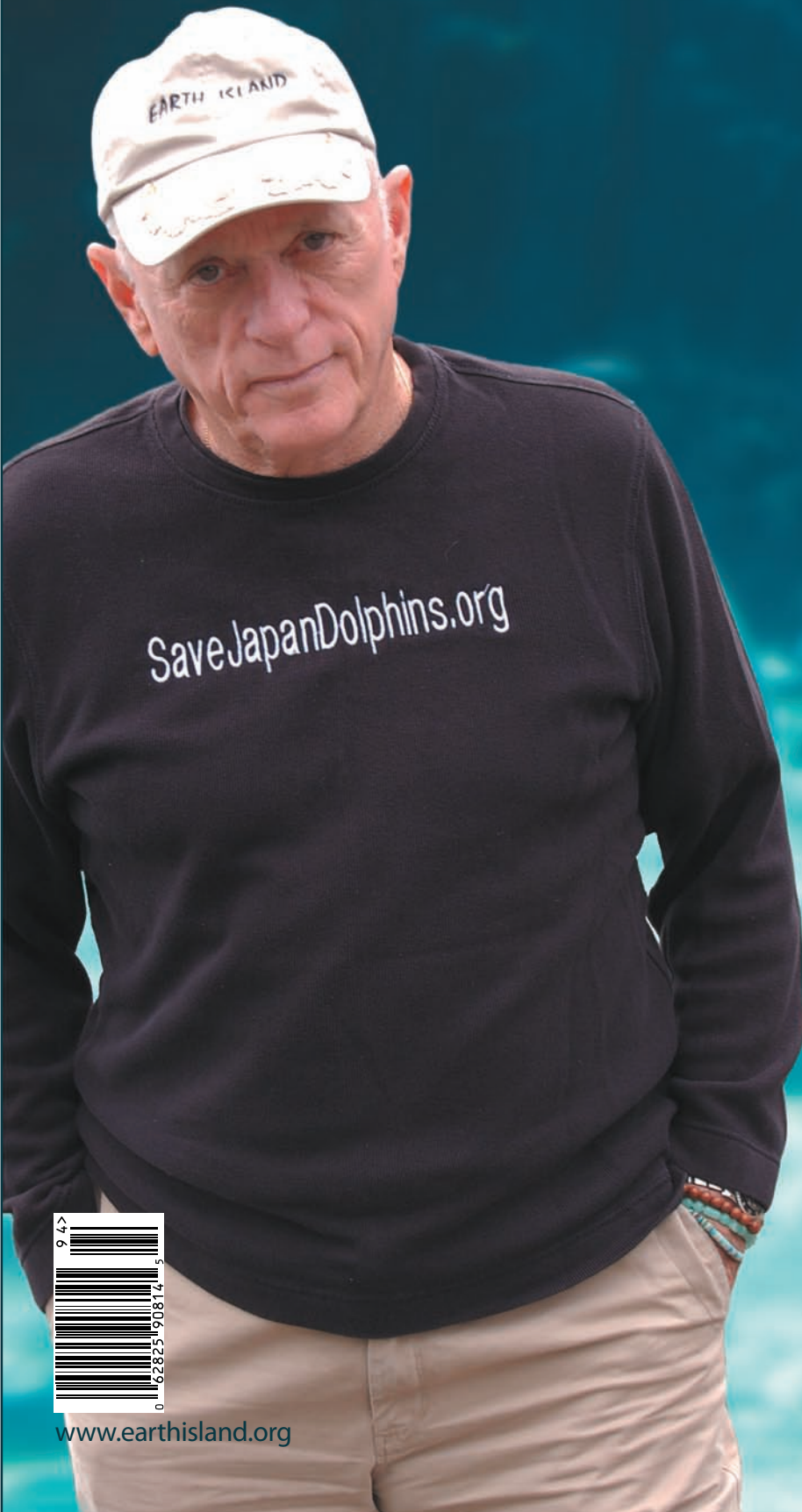
Photos by Sebastião Salgado

# Earth Island Journal

News of the World Environment

WINTER 2010

\$5.00



WORLD OF WONDER  
Toward a Re-enchantment  
with Nature

FOREST MEDIEVAL  
Inside Poland's Last  
Old Growth Forest

## The Reluctant Warrior

Ric O'Barry's Crusade  
to Free Dolphins



[www.earthisland.org](http://www.earthisland.org)

At 70, Ric O'Barry Would Love to  
Be at Home Watering His  
Bamboo and Playing with  
His Five-Year-Old Daughter.

**Instead,**  
He Spends Most  
of His Time with  
People Who Hate Him.

# The Reluctant Warrior

by Jason Mark



**I**T WASN'T NOON YET, and Ric O'Barry was tired. He had circled the globe during the past month, first flying from his home in Coconut Grove, Florida to Taiji, Japan to monitor the start of the annual dolphin hunt, then from Japan to France on a press junket, home to Florida for a brief stop, then back again to Taiji. In a few days, O'Barry would return to Europe to promote the documentary film he stars in, *The Cove*, and finally wrap up 62 days of constant campaigning. Now, standing on a forested hillside above the lovely aquamarine inlet that has become infamous for the slaughter of dolphins, he waited for a crew from *60 Minutes*-Australia to get the right angle on a setup shot. He yawned.

But fatigue wasn't turning into impatience. Having worked for years as an animal trainer and underwater stuntman on more than a dozen television shows and movies, O'Barry is no stranger to the elaborate preparations required for film's illusion. Nor is he innocent about how to use the media to take an obscure issue and make it a cause célèbre: Watching the maneuvering and remaneuvering of a camera crew was just part of the business of saving dolphins.

"I'm talking to seven million people," O'Barry said, referring to the average number of weekly viewers of Australia's *60 Minutes*. "I'm very conscious of that."

The producer said they were ready and O'Barry let out a little sigh, as he almost always does before answering questions. Then, just as characteristically, he performed with gusto one of his well-polished raps.

"You see those tarps?" he asked, motioning to the rolls of green cloth coiled above where the local fishermen stab dolphins to death. "They're covering up. It's a cover up. They say this is their tradition and their culture, but this begs the question: What are they hiding? Are they ashamed of their tradition and culture?"

When O'Barry gives an interview, he makes long, steady moves with his hands. This habit makes it hard to miss the dolphin tattoo on his left hand, or the fact that he is missing the top of his right thumb, which he blew off while working on the James Bond film *Never Say Never Again*. At 70, his white hair is thin and the line of his jaw has softened, but his brown eyes are sharp. He wears almost the same outfit every day: khaki pants, a khaki cargo vest with "Dolphin Rescue Team" embroidered on the breast, a beaten tan hat with captain's laurels ironed on the brim, and two-toned Sperry Top-Siders, no socks. The overall affect is of an avuncular hipster, a kind of Pirate for Good who doesn't seem to notice if he has told you the same story two or three times, a story that always has to do with dolphins. "The dolphin's smile is nature's greatest deception," is one of his favorite lines.

Since *The Cove* became a critical success at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2009, O'Barry has given countless media tours of Taiji — the small Japanese fishing village on the picturesque Wakayama coast that, as he says, is "part Norman Rockwell and part Norman Bates." The next stop on the tour for the *60 Minutes* journalists was the Taiji Whale Museum or, as O'Barry tells reporters, "a whaling museum that celebrates the killing of dolphins and whales."

In a country known for its cutting edge technology, the Taiji Whale Museum is a crude affair. The tanks where the dolphins live are tiny and there are cracks in the concrete amphitheater. The place is an easy target for O'Barry, who has spent most of the past 40 years on an international crusade to halt the captivity of dolphins.

He led the *60 Minutes* crew to the main arena, where a small crowd watched the first dolphin show of the day. "They have nowhere to go and nothing to do — it's cruel and unusual," he said. "The only way out is

death. You literally bore them to death. You go to the Sydney Zoo and look at the snake exhibit: there's trees and branches. Even a cold-blooded snake is given more consideration."

Next, he took the crew to a small cinderblock building where two spotted dolphins were swimming back and forth in a pool barely 20 feet long by 15 feet wide. The dolphins kept coming up to the glass to make eye contact with the human onlookers.

O'Barry addressed the camera: "This is not living. This is surviving. Living is feeding in the ocean, swimming 40 miles a day. This is sensory deprivation. They say this is about education, to create an appreciation for dolphins. But the education doesn't work, because one of the largest dolphin slaughters in the world happens right around the corner, and no one cares."

For his final act of the morning, O'Barry ushered the Australians to a dome where visitors can walk into a glass tunnel and stand beneath the dolphins as they swim circles. He pointed to a young dolphin swimming at its mother's side and let loose another barrage: "That baby will be here its whole life. It will never know the tides. It will never know what it's like to hunt. It will be bored to death."

On the way back to the entrance, past a small kiosk selling barbecued whale meat for ¥500 ("What's that about?" O'Barry said. "You can eat whale meat while watching a whale show."), the *60 Minutes* crew got caught up in the scene of Japanese girls snapping cell phone photos as they fed a trio of pilot whales. Left alone, O'Barry wandered to the lagoon where a solitary orca spends most of its time listlessly bobbing. His shoulders sagged as he sat, chin in his hands, staring at the orca. It looked like all of the energy had drained from him.

"This stays with me for days," he said on the way out. "I'll have a hang-over after looking at this stuff." ▶

“He sees it from their perspective,” O’Barry’s wife, Helene, told me later. “He feels what they feel. He feels a lot of anguish, and you can see it in his eyes when he is looking at the dolphins. And it’s just all those sleepless nights, sleepless in Taiji. It’s such a nightmare, you can’t even imagine it.”

**T**he *Cove* opens with O’Barry giving his Taiji tour and — even through a series of detours into the Minamata mercury poisoning of the 1950s, humans’ fascination with dolphins, and Japanese food culture — keeps him at the film’s emotional center. This works well because O’Barry’s story is so novelistic: the lone man on a search for self and meaning. O’Barry, as the film lays out, started his career as the trainer for the five dolphins that starred in the 1960s series *Flipper*. The popular television show played a large role in creating the modern affection for dolphins, and so, in a way, O’Barry is responsible for the rise of the dolphin entertainment industry.

But after working as a dolphin trainer for nearly a decade, O’Barry realized with a shock that what he had been doing was wrong. One day in 1970, after the television show had ended, O’Barry was called to the Miami Seaquarium, where he found Kathy, one of the *Flipper* dolphins, sick in the water. The animal died in his arms and sank to the bottom of the tank. At that moment, O’Barry decided to commit his life to freeing dolphins. In the beginning of his 1989 memoir, *Behind the Dolphin Smile*, he wrote: “I wanted people to realize that it was wrong to own dolphins, and even worse, if possible, to make them do silly tricks.... With the death of Kathy, the dolphin I most dearly loved, [I was on] a pilgrimage to try to undo at least in part some of the mess I had made of things.”

O’Barry believes he’s to blame for the dolphins at the Taiji Whale Museum, the tanks at some 150 similar dolphinariums, the swim-with-the-dolphins

programs at resorts. His convert’s zeal is fueled by the emotional attachments he has had with individual dolphins over the years, both as a trainer and, later, as he worked to return them to the wild. For O’Barry, the dolphin hunt in Taiji isn’t just killing — it’s murder.

“With most documentaries you need a hook, an emotional hook, something that will carry your narrative all the way through,” said Louie Psihoyos, director of *The Cove*. “Ric was a perfect choice for me for a protagonist.”

O’Barry’s complex history, combined with some unorthodox storytelling, has made the movie a darling among reviewers. *The New York Times* called it “an exceptionally well-made documentary that unfolds like a spy thriller”; *Time* said it’s “slick and smart.” According to Hollywood bloggers, the film is on the short list to get an Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary.

*The Cove* departs from conventional documentaries by being a movie about the making of a movie. Near the start of the film, O’Barry tells Psihoyos that to stop the dolphin slaughter in Taiji, the world needs to see and hear what is happening there. But the local fishermen — pissed off at the intruding Westerners — have set up a round-the-clock defense. So Psihoyos assembles a team of divers and camouflage experts to penetrate the cove and get the incriminating footage.

The result is a cross between *Free Willy* and *Mission: Impossible*. Many of the scenes are shot in the eerie green of night vision goggles or the spookier luminous black-and-silver of infrared lenses. Handheld cameras put the viewer at the center of the action as Psihoyos’s crew undertakes repeated sorties to place hidden cameras and microphones. The suspense builds until the team gets what it came for: gruesome images of the local fishermen capturing dolphins for sale to aquatic parks and then, the next morning, stabbing dozens of them to death. Few

documentaries pack such adrenaline.

The film — and the media attention it has generated — has been a huge boost to O’Barry’s efforts. Since the film came out, more than 430,000 people have signed an online petition calling for the Japanese Fisheries Agency to prohibit the killing. Nearly 300,000 people have “friended” O’Barry on Facebook. The town of Broome, Australia briefly suspended its sister city relationship with Taiji, creating a minor diplomatic dustup.

O’Barry told me, “*The Cove* defines the issue. If a journalist has seen the movie, I don’t have to explain to them why dolphin captivity is wrong. They get it. That’s a game-changer for me.”

Lincoln O’Barry, Ric’s 37-year-old son who has worked closely with him over the years, said that the film has been a “tipping point” for his dad’s efforts, and that “we just need a little push to get over the edge.” Lincoln is currently working with the Discovery Channel to produce a television series about Ric and Taiji modeled on the show *Whale Wars*.

The tsunami of international attention is a core part of Ric O’Barry’s strategy of *gaiatsu*, the Japanese word for “external pressure.” The more people who see the film and sign the petition, the more likely it is that the Japanese will halt the hunt. “*The Cove* is *gaiatsu* on a massive scale,” O’Barry likes to say. At the same time, he is well aware that *gaiatsu* is insufficient, and that the dolphin killing won’t end until there is an outcry within Japan to halt the practice. “The real change has to come from the inside of Japan,” Lincoln said.

But generating a popular revolt against the hunt won’t be easy, at least judging by the reception to *The Cove* at a September screening at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Tokyo. “The problem with making gestures in civil disobedience, whether political demonstrations or environmental statements,” O’Barry wrote in *Behind the Dolphin*

*Smile*, “is that they depend on others for their meaning.” The same could be said for the filmmaking. What a Western audience might see as a clarion call against animal abuse, the Japanese view as cultural imperialism. The press screening had been organized by Earth Island Institute’s International Marine Mammal Project — which has employed O’Barry for the last three years — as a way to generate advance buzz for the film’s public debut at the Tokyo Film Festival. During the showing, the audience responded well to the film. But in a press conference after the movie, the correspondents’ questions turned sharp as they demanded to know whether the animal rights issue would sway the Japanese, many of whom don’t see a distinction between eating a dolphin and eating a cow. A reporter from *The Times* of London asked: “Is there a difference between hunting Bambi and hunting Flipper?”

O’Barry is hypersensitive about the charge of cultural imperialism and goes to great lengths to make clear that the vast majority of Japanese are not involved in the hunt and don’t even know about it. “If you lived in a small town in America,” he said to me, “and you had a group of Japanese showing up to protest something, it would be outrageous.” Imagine if dozens of Japanese activists and hordes of international media descended on, say, Camden, Maine and demanded to know why the locals eat bacon.

At the Correspondents Club screening, O’Barry was well prepared for this line of argument, which he has sought to address since he first traveled to Japan in 1976 in an effort to ease the Greenpeace-led boycott of the nation. O’Barry insisted that more important than the abuse of dolphins was the fact that dolphin meat has dangerous concentrations of mercury. “It’s not an animal rights issue — it’s a human rights issue,” he said. “It’s about people’s right to know. *The Cove* will do what the Japanese media have failed to do — report



courtesy Oceanic Preservation Society

The documentary *The Cove* is like *Free Willy* meets *Mission: Impossible*.

the truth. And the truth is that dolphin meat is tainted with mercury.”

The reporters kept asking about animal rights, but O’Barry stuck to his message. Then he engaged in a bit of theater. “If you find that dolphin meat is not toxic, I’ll go away and never come back,” he offered. “But if it is toxic, then print that.” As he said this, he held up a package of dolphin meat from a grocery store. The photographers, who mostly had been still, jumped up and filled the room with the flutter of shutters snapping.

Many of the reporters left the room unconvinced. “Maybe it’s just an anti-sushi campaign,” a veteran journalist for one of Japan’s most influential newspapers said to me.

Still, the film was having an effect. Just a week earlier, the fishermen in Taiji had driven a pod of dolphins into the cove and had captured a few dozen to sell to the marine entertainment industry. But instead of killing the rest for meat — their usual tactic — the fishermen decided to let them go. Seventy dolphins returned to the sea.

Ric Barry O’Feldman (he changed his name in the mid-eighties, to boost his showbiz career) grew up on Miami Beach. His father owned a place called the Biscayne Restaurant, and Ric spent most of his childhood in the water or on the sand. He remembers his fascination for dolphins coming early: “I became attracted when I was about three feet tall, standing on Miami Beach.... That was during World War II, and my mom told me stories about how dolphins had saved pilots who had been shot down. You never heard of other wild animals saving humans. There’s something incredible about that. It’s communication.”

When he was five-years-old, he found a one-dollar bill on the beach and bought a pair of swimming goggles. The ability to see underwater opened up a new world. “Keep your head underwater, and everything slows down,” he told me. “It’s quiet, peaceful, slow motion. The whole world should be underwater.”

At 16, he lied about his age, enlisted in the Navy, and served five years, mostly in the Mediterranean, during which time he learned to dive. After his ►

discharge, he found a job with Art McKee, a South Florida treasure hunter. McKee had found a measure of fame and fortune when he discovered the *Capitana el Rui*, a Spanish galleon that sunk in 1773, and used some of the loot to build McKee's Museum of Sunken Treasure, which he built out of coral.

Working for McKee, O'Barry had his first intimate experience with dolphins. On an expedition to locate a Spanish ship that had sunk in the Bahamian Out Islands, the treasure seekers found themselves amid a huge pod of spotted dolphins. The divers jumped out of the water, fearing sharks. O'Barry, who was on the boat and could see the animals' signature dorsal fins, jumped in. The dolphins came toward him to play.

"You really need to get under the water, to be in clear water, to see them in all of their majesty," he said. "When you go there, the dolphins initiate the contact and they control the interac-

tion, unlike the dolphinarium. You do a half hour with them, and then they get bored and swim away. It's wonderful, I don't know how to describe it. I go back there whenever I can, just to remind myself why I'm doing this."

Working for McKee was exciting, but not lucrative. With McKee's help, O'Barry found a steadily paying gig at the Miami Seaquarium. He started out on the aquarium's boat that sailed around the Atlantic and Caribbean gathering species, including dolphins, for the exhibits. Eventually, O'Barry got a promotion to work at the aquarium's main tank, feeding the fishes and sharks while visitors watched from the other side of the glass. Promoted again as understudy to the performers who worked the dolphin shows, soon O'Barry was training the dolphins himself.

His big break came when Ivan Tors, producer of *Sea Hunt*, approached the Seaquarium about filming a television series there. Two feature films about an

intelligent and helpful dolphin — *Flipper* and *Flipper's New Adventure* — had been hits already, and Tors, along with an underwater director named Ricou Browning, had a deal with NBC to do a sitcom. One day, O'Barry ran into Browning and the two bonded over dolphin-training methods. O'Barry talked his way onto the show as an animal trainer and dolphin caretaker.

It was a heady experience for a young man. "You know the house that the family on the TV show lived in? That was my house," he said. "There was a two- or three- acre section of the Seaquarium where no one was. Just me and the dolphins." The show was a success, its lilting theme song soon ingrained in the popular culture. The job paid well and gave O'Barry a bit of Hollywood status. He found himself in the middle of a vibrant cultural scene. "I grew up in this incredible community of artists and musicians," Lincoln O'Barry told me. "The Mamas and



courtesy The Dolphin Project

Ric O'Barry worked for several years as a dolphin trainer for the popular TV series *Flipper*. "Those were wonderful, halcyon days," he said. "I had an XKE Jaguar, three Porsches, a red Ford Thunderbird, and a lot of girlfriends."

Papas lived on my street. Fred Neil lived on my street. Tennessee Williams, Richie Havens lived on my street. So we were always surrounded by dolphins and music.” David Crosby was a sailing buddy; Joni Mitchell came by the *Flipper* lagoon to play music for Kathy and the other *Flipper* dolphins. The producer Michael Lang (Lincoln’s godfather) was a regular at the O’Barry house and, according to at least one telling, the idea for Woodstock was hatched at their kitchen table.

O’Barry said, “I look back on the *Flipper* experience — those were wonderful, halcyon days. I had an XKE Jaguar, three Porsches, a red Ford Thunderbird, and a lot of girlfriends.”

But as he spent more time with the dolphins, he started to question the righteousness of the enterprise. He secretly admired the dolphins that resisted learning tricks. “About halfway through the TV series I really started having second thoughts about captivity,” he said. He was unprepared, however, to make a big fuss. Things were going too well to ruin the party. “I remember complaining to everybody: ‘This is not right, you know.’ But I didn’t actually do anything.”

After the television series wrapped up, O’Barry wasn’t sure what to do. He bummed around Miami. He traveled to India. He mostly kept to himself. Then, the death of Kathy gave him a new purpose. With folk singer Fred Neil he founded The Dolphin Project, which was dedicated to investigating dolphin consciousness and rehabilitating dolphins into the wild. Having been a dolphin trainer for years, O’Barry was now committed to the idea of *un*-training them.

“His story of redemption parallels our own culture’s,” Psihoyos said. “The Western culture, we are like him. We are like he was. We have material success, you know, we have plenty of money. But we are going to have to turn our back on the way we get our energy, on the way we treat, not just dolphins,

but the whole environment. Ric’s hero’s journey is one that I think our whole society is going to have to make.”

**A**nimal rights organizations have known about the annual hunt in Taiji since 1979, when a filmmaker shot footage of local fishermen driving dolphins and melon-headed whales into the shore for slaughter. But the issue didn’t attract much energy until 2003, when Sea Shepherd — the group of activists known for their confrontations with Japanese whalers in the Southern Ocean — sent a crew to investigate. While in Taiji, two Sea Shepherd activists jumped into the cove and attempted to cut the net penning the dolphins in. They were arrested, jailed for 23 days, and then deported.

That same year, O’Barry, at a summit hosted by Earth Island’s International Marine Mammal Project to discuss strategies for freeing captive whales and dolphins, was recruited for the Taiji mission: “I was hoping someone else would raise their hand,” O’Barry told me, “but no one did. So I raised my hand and said I would go. And we literally passed the hat and the next day I was on the plane to Taiji. On the way back... I called Dave Phillips [director of IMMP and a co-director of Earth Island Institute] and said, ‘This is too big for any one group.’”

So O’Barry and Phillips pulled together a number of organizations — Earth Island Institute, In Defense of Animals, a Swiss group called Ocean Care, Animal Welfare Institute, and the UK-based Campaign Whale — to form the Save Japan Dolphins Coalition and pay for O’Barry to expose and stop the dolphin capture and killing. O’Barry traveled repeatedly to Taiji over the next two years. He spent most of his time hiding in the thickets above the cove, trying to get video proof of the slaughter. He pulled all-nighters in the rain and spent long days in the sun. Working alone, and verbally threatened by the local fishermen, he sometimes

felt afraid. “Let’s say somebody decided to do something stupid,” he told me when we were with the *60 Minutes* crew on the bluff. “They could easily say, ‘Hey it was an accident. He fell.’”

The years spent by himself, the frustration of trying to convince the world of an injustice that he feels so acutely, have left a mark on O’Barry. He carries with him a loneliness, the weight of a martyr. He is convinced that were it not for him and a small group of allies, the Taiji scandal would fade away. “What I do is, I start looking around: Well, who the hell is going to do this if I stay home?” he said. “Will the government do it, any government? No. Will the marine mammal scientists of the world do it? No. Will the multi-billion-dollar captivity industry and WAZA [World Association of Zoos and Aquariums] do it? No. The animal welfare community? They do a lot of good things, but they’re not doing this. So who is going to do this? You use the process of elimination: We’re the only hope.”

This single-minded commitment has won O’Barry a great deal of respect. As Sea Shepherd founder Paul Watson told me, “Ric is one of the most focused people in the movement — knowing what his objective is and pursuing it. And his objective is freeing dolphins and stopping the capture and killing of dolphins around the world. And there is no one who has done that with more passion than he has.”

For O’Barry, who describes himself as “reclusive,” the often-solitary struggle is bearable. But the constant conflict takes its toll. Although he has come to terms with the fact that battling is part of his job description, he is not a natural fighter. If some people seek out drama because it flatters their sense of self-importance, O’Barry is not one of them. “The whole job, the whole effort, it’s all about conflict,” Helene, his wife, said. “It’s the thing he likes the least. He doesn’t want to see conflict himself.”

I witnessed how confrontation impacts O’Barry the night of *The Cove* ►

screening at the press club. Normally, O'Barry exudes a calmness even when everyone around him is in motion; as his Japanese translator put it, he is the eye at the center of the cyclone. But in the hours leading up to the showing, he had a difficult time sitting still. He later confided to me, "sometimes the stress of anticipating the battle is worse than the battle itself." That night, the battle felt bad enough, and after the fiery Q&A his stomach was "topsy-turvy." And so while his team gathered their equipment, O'Barry slipped unnoticed out a back door. His entourage was left wondering what had happened to him.

---

**"I don't know how I free these dolphins — but I know that if I didn't show up, it would never happen."**

---

O'Barry's activist career started inauspiciously. Immediately after Kathy died in his arms, he hopped on a plane and flew to the island of Bimini, in the Bahamas, where he knew that a marine lab kept a solitary dolphin named Charlie Brown. O'Barry's plan was simple: As part of the first Earth Day celebration he would don a green armband, boat out to the pen, cut the mesh holding the dolphin in, and usher it to freedom. His civil disobedience would call attention to the plight of captive dolphins around the world.

But everything went wrong. When he finished cutting the wire cage, it collapsed on top of him and pinned him to the seafloor, nearly drowning him. Then the tide went out, leaving his boat stranded inside the pen. Worse, he couldn't get Charlie Brown to escape; the dolphin just kept swimming around the space it had known for years. The mission felt like a total failure.

The next morning, O'Barry was in the Bimini jail, and a week later in

court, charged with trespassing. During the trial, O'Barry showed an instinct for political theater that has served him well in subsequent decades. He had noticed that the chief of police was a devout Christian, and when it came time to enter his plea, he said "guilty," then asked if he could read from the police chief's Bible. He opened to Genesis and, with a flourish, read about how God created "great whales" and "saw that it was good." The capture of dolphins, he said, violated God's law.

The judge charged him with a five-dollar fine and ordered him on the next plane. Charlie Brown remained in his pen. But the stunt succeeded in sparking awareness about dolphin captivity. *The Miami Herald* ran a front page story headlined, "Trainer of Flipper in Flap; Can't Get Dolphin to Flee." *Life* magazine covered the episode.

The Bimini action established a hallmark of O'Barry's method — instinct and emotion first. He is convinced that the secret to his successes is his mere presence. Paul Watson told me, "Ric is an example of what Woody Allen once said, that 90 percent of success is just being there."

For O'Barry, planning is a secondary concern, something that he often leaves to others. Discussions of tactics and strategy don't interest him: "I don't always know what to do, but I know you have to at least show up.... I respond to information. I get a call: There are six dolphins in a cage in Haiti. I get pictures. I get on a plane and I go. I don't know how I free these dolphins — but I know that if I didn't show up, it would never happen."

This persistence often has led to personal sacrifices. Mark Lavelle, an old friend who has known him since "his pillow was full of receipts he was never going to get reimbursed for," told me: "He's a person who doesn't compromise his beliefs. I don't know how he does it. It's just over and over and over. It's just tiring, and he doesn't spend enough time with his family."

That was certainly true throughout much of the 1980s, when O'Barry was trying to rehabilitate dolphins in Israel, Brazil, and Central America. He was living hand-to-mouth working as a stuntman and extra, and what money he had went straight to The Dolphin Project. His commitment was straining his relationships. "The issues, it's always the issues," O'Barry told me. "That's how I lost my first family. It was a triangle: me and Martha and the dolphins. And triangles never work. That's how it was with Lincoln. I was supposed to be there for a school event, and instead I was off in Australia."

Lincoln acknowledges that his father was often absent, but he doesn't harbor any resentment. "I wasn't really aware that it was an unusual situation until I was much older," he said. "I don't think he should have done anything differently. People like that have to sacrifice everything in their life."

As an escape, O'Barry took up oil painting. Then "the issues" began to intrude onto the canvas. "The first series of paintings I did was a woman in a bathtub," he said. "The second painting, there is a towel hanging out of the bathtub, and I painted a little embroidered dolphin on the towel. The next painting, there is a dolphin in the bathtub with the woman. And the next painting, the woman's gone. So I started painting dolphins." In 1990, he and Martha got a divorce.

Today, O'Barry is just as committed, but he has found more of a balance between his work and his family. "When he is with his family, he is really with his family," said Helene, whom he married in 1999. "Our five-year-old daughter forces him out of this world. Going for bike rides or going swimming. That has meant a lot to him."

The burning guilt that once drove him has cooled, and what was once obsession has made way for a steadier emotion, a sorrow that he refuses to let become unhappiness. Among social change activists, there are those driven

by anger and those spurred by sadness. The angry ones often become brittle and sharp as the injustices of the world grind into cynicism. Those who pursue justice from a feeling of sadness are more likely to achieve a kind of grace, an unflinching recognition of the world as it is coupled with faith that it can change for the better. O'Barry fits in the latter category. "Ric hasn't changed at all these years," Lavelle said. "He never got jaded." At the same time, he has come to peace with the idea that he may not see the victory he has sought. "There's a couple of lifetimes of work out there," O'Barry told me.

This natural patience is what makes O'Barry good at deprogramming dolphins before releasing them into the wild. "We are both kind of quiet people, so we get along really well because of that," Helene said. "Our best times have been when we are living in the jungle together or living on islands, doing this work he so obviously loves. And he's an expert at that. He's so in tune with the dolphins. He doesn't feel the need that a lot of people have — to own them. He gives them their space."

Which is, of course, not at all like the jostling he has experienced during his years of campaigning. The world of people is not his element.

"If my detractors knew how much I like staying home and watering the bamboo, they would probably pay me half a million dollars to stay home and water the bamboo," he said. "My favorite thing is watering the plants. I love watching the bamboo grow in slow motion."

In our first conversation, O'Barry told me, "I've spent much of the last 40 years with people who hate me. Instead, I could be at home with people who love me." It's a phrase that, along with the bamboo line, appears often in news articles. These repetitions could be mistaken for an older man's habit. Or they could be the long-rehearsed lines of a well-played part. Because O'Barry

is, in a way, performing a role he has written for himself — the redeemed man working to expunge his sins.

Which is not to say that he is insincere. Only that, like many public figures, O'Barry has crafted a persona, and this persona — with its parable-perfect story and snappy one-liners — gives him an armor that protects him from the world.



O'Barry at the Taiji Whale Museum

Like many people who are accustomed to being the center of attention, O'Barry is a mix of the withdrawn and the eager. He has the instincts of an introvert; "I've never been accused of making chit-chat," he wrote in his memoir. At the same time, he is an affirmation-seeker; "I've always liked people and wanted them to like me," he also wrote. It's a combination ripe for vulnerability. Which is why the performance is important: It allows him to stay committed to "the issues" without burning out.

I glimpsed O'Barry's need to be liked one morning in Taiji. He was using Skype to talk with an official in the office of the president of the Dominican Republic. They had just started discussing the controversy over importing captured dolphins when the call got dropped. O'Barry tried unsuccessfully to re-initiate the call. When

I glanced over, he was staring down at his lap, his hands limp, much like when he was looking at the orca at the whale museum. "This guy works for the president," he nearly moaned. "He's going to think I'm so rude."

This is O'Barry's central contradiction: He hates to be disliked, yet he has committed himself to a line of work in which he is destined to cause antagonism. He may be leading the battle to stop the dolphin killing in Taiji, but he is a reluctant warrior. It is only an ethic of service that keeps him going. "He has a very hard time saying *no*, my dad," Lincoln said.

Friends and family are split on whether he will keep up the breakneck pace he has maintained for decades. "I think he's got a couple of years in him, and that's it," Lincoln said. "To a lot of people he seems like a superhero, but even superheroes need a day off every once in a while."

Others aren't so sure. "One of the things Ric has demonstrated is that you don't retire from this movement," Watson said. "You are in it for life. Eighty, ninety or whatever, he will still be in it. He's the kind of person who changes the world. That's the only thing that changes the world — individual passion. Governments don't change things. Big organizations don't change things. Individuals change things."

On our second evening in Taiji, I asked O'Barry what his plans were for the future. It had been a long day, including press interviews and a tense standoff between the media and the local fishermen who had been selling whale meat at the dock. But O'Barry was in fine spirits, singing softly to himself, as he does when he's happy.

"I'm coming back," he said. "You bet I'm coming back. We've got these bastards on the run."

Then he put his car in drive and headed for the cove, just to check on things one last time. ■

**Jason Mark** is editor of *Earth Island Journal*.