

Closing the Net on Industrial Fishing

Seaspiracy, the latest Netflix documentary exposing the impact of our food systems, is making a splash.

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It was clear from the title and the promotion of the Netflix documentary Seaspiracy that it was going to adopt a similar approach to the highly influential 2014 documentary Cowspiracy, which uncovered the sheer scale and destructive impact of animal agriculture.

Seaspiracy follows Ali, an activist and filmmaker who embarks on a journey of discovery which starts with beach clean-ups, before exposing viewers to the more serious issues of plunder and devastation of the oceans, and even the brutal world of modern slavery.

The 90-minute documentary covers a lot of ground and makes for informative viewing, weaving interviews with scientists and activist into a strong narrative.

Lifting the lid

Like *Cowspiracy* before it, *Seaspiracy* takes the form of an exposé, shining a light on industry practices that will shock and disgust audiences, and displaying alarming statistics which paint a picture of ocean ecosystems on the brink of collapse.

We’re told that sharks are killed at a rate of over 11,000 per hour across the world, mostly as by-catch from commercial fishing, with some shark species populations declining by more than 90 percent in just the last few decades. Six out of seven species of sea turtle are either threatened or endangered, and seabirds have declined by around 70 percent due to competition with the fishing industry for their natural source of food.

Much of the information in the film will be known to environmentalists. Previous campaigns have highlighted the horrors of the shark finning industry and of ‘ghost gear’ – fishing nets and equipment that continues to wreak havoc for years after being discarded. Documentaries like *The Cove* have also covered parts of this story before.

But this information will be new to many viewers, and the framing of the film – lifting the lid to expose a secretive and corrupt industry – acts as an effective hook which compels viewers to watch on and discover more.

The issue of plastics in the ocean has gained considerable public interest in the last couple of years, and this is where the film begins. The narrative then moves on to the “whale in the

room” – that industrial fishing itself, and our massive demand for fish, is [the real problem](#).

‘Sustainable’

The film then takes aim at ocean conservation groups like the Marine Stewardship Council and the Earth Island Institute, as well as certification schemes which claim to offer consumers a ‘sustainable’ seafood option. Using clips taken from interviews with staff at these organisations, and commentary from other conservationists, notably George Monbiot, the film offers a simple but powerful critique of their approach which attempts to work with the fishing industry to curb its worst excesses.

The suggestion that these groups are complicit or even entirely ‘bought’ by the fishing industry may be unfair, and the heavily edited interviews, packed with leading questions and absent of context, tell us little about the activities or motivations of the organisations involved. But what the film gets right here is far more important than what it gets wrong.

The inability of conservationists and government agencies to truly know what goes on at sea, or to enforce the most even the basic laws and standards, is painfully obvious. Alongside a failure of public and political engagement with the issue, this is leading to rapid destruction of the world’s most diverse ecosystems, and with them the very life systems on which we depend.



Seaspiracy does an excellent job of describing the complex relationships found in ocean food chains and explains how the extinction of some species can lead to the loss of many more. It also highlights the profound dependence we have on marine ecosystems to regulate the climate.

By far the planet’s largest store of both carbon and heat, the condition of the oceans has an enormous impact on the climate and our ability to prevent a run-away climate emergency. Destruction of oceanic plant and animal life by industrial fishing is likened to deforestation on land, but on an even greater scale, undermining the ocean’s ability to remove and store carbon from the atmosphere.

Innocent

The film uses graphic and deeply upsetting footage throughout. Even those who struggle to empathise with marine animals will surely be affected by its depictions of the violence and cruelty inflicted on fish, sharks, dolphins and whales at the hands of humans.

The emotionally powerful footage sets the scene for the latter part of the film, which explains the extraordinary sensory and communicative capacities of fish, challenging the viewer to overturn their preconceptions of fish as simple or lesser animals.

Veteran oceanographer Dr Sylvia Earle gives some of the most thoughtful commentary on this topic.

“We feel pain, we feel touch, but fish have a lateral line down their sides that senses the most exquisite little movements in the water, so you see a thousand fish moving like one fish...

“Those who say it doesn’t matter what you do to a fish because they can’t feel anything, or that they can’t relate to pain, or they can’t sense danger in the future... well they haven’t really observed fish.

“I think it’s a justification for doing dastardly things to innocent creatures. That’s the only explanation I can think of for treating fish with such a barbaric attitude.”

Hope

The film closes by addressing some of the concerns that viewers might have about no longer eating fish, and rightly draws the conclusion that eliminating fish from our diets is the single biggest thing each of us can do to protect our oceans.

No doubt *Seaspiracy* will be criticised for reducing the complexities of the fishing industry into a somewhat vague global conspiracy.

But the simplicity of its message is also its strength, standing in stark contrast to the innumerable sustainability initiatives which leave most of us entirely confused about the causes of ocean degradation and unaware of the basic choice we have to make.

Doubtless this film will help to change people’s minds about the fishing industry.

If you haven’t already, [watch it](#) and use it to open conversations with family and friends about what we can do to protect our seas and the animals that live in them. Stick with it to the end and you’ll be offered a hopeful vision of the future, based on the incredible resilience of ocean ecosystems and their ability to recover, if only we would give them the chance.

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Featured image: Fish near a FAD in the Pacific Ocean. Photo: © Paul Hilton / Greenpeace.

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