SAVE OUR OCEANS
SAVE OUR FUTURE

A GATHERING OF GREAT MINDS AT THE WAIMEA OCEAN FILM FESTIVAL

WORDS BY ANDREW WALSH
IMAGE BY RAY COLLINS
What are the origins of the festival? How did you decide to create it and what was the inspiration?

The festival began a bit by accident. I saw a film that seemed so important, I thought it should be shown here. The film brought attention to the collapse of fisheries worldwide, looking in particular at the collapse of the ocean ecosystem, as climate determines whether we have a stable water supply or can grow food. Climate change and ocean acidification will affect everything about our lives. So many people here depend on fish for their livelihood, it seemed like we should address some of the major crises facing our oceans, and thus our societies, today.

What is the importance of having the festival here on the Big Island? What added weight or relevance does the location bring?

The Big Island is a very special place. The resorts supporting the festival from the start—Four Seasons Resort Hualālai, The Fairmont Orchid, and Mauna Kea Resort—are listed among the top 10 hotels and resorts in the country, and among the top properties in the world. This reflects the fact that there are extraordinary people here, and that the island draws extraordinary people as well, whether to vacation, or spend part of the year. Many of those are dynamic individuals with great minds—people who know how to get things done, and can make a significant difference, whether by making small, or large, changes in how they operate the businesses or corporations they run, or in the endeavors they support.

What is the festival like? What is it about the films shown at the festival?

Film festival categories are: ocean experience, which includes surfing and paddling; ocean environment, which also looks at what we do on land; and, island culture, which includes Hawaiians as well as other island cultures, history and people. The festival also encompasses films that are inspirational, or that speak to the human spirit and condition, and the reasons as to how and why we do things. The festival is as much about the filmmaker Q&As, speakers and presentations, as about the films themselves. The festival also incorporates exhibits, and early morning activities, such as outrigger canoe paddling.

What is your hope or vision for the audience in terms of what they take away or how they might be inspired to act based upon participation in the festival?

At a core level, the festival is meant to be fun, engaging and inspiring. At a higher level, I’ve come to understand that climate change and ocean acidification will affect everything about our lives in the coming years. Even our political security depends on a stable climate, as climate determines whether we have a stable water supply or can grow food. One of the films last year looked at how drought, and a failed grain harvest in Russia, resulted in bread shortages and the unraveling of the political structure in Syria. The collapse of the ocean ecosystem, through the combined impacts of warming ocean temperatures and ocean acidification, would be more disastrous than we can imagine. My biggest hope with the festival is that it will inspire the great minds on this island to focus attention on energy solutions, and the development of these across all three primary points of consumption: through energy-efficient (LEED certified) buildings; solar and wind development for electricity; and, the development of good multi-modal transportation systems based around rail.

In addition, inspiring people to reduce plastic use and packaging, and to support sustainable fishing practices, potentially incorporating traditional Hawaiian fishing knowledge into modern use, would be another hope of the festival, along with greater protection of marine life and fisheries through the establishment of effective marine reserves and ecotourism opportunities.

Please share what these energy solutions would look like. If you look at how we use energy in this country you find that buildings account for something between 40-50% of consumption. Even without the addition of solar panels, the energy requirements of a building can be reduced by 70 to 80% through smart design and the use of better materials. Electricity accounts for approximately one-third of the energy we use, although some of this is accounted for in buildings, and can be reduced at the baseline through design. Bringing more intelligent about energy use, such as setting reasonable heating and cooling standards for commercial buildings, as Starbucks and the City of Denver have done, would further reduce energy use to start.

Wind is already our least expensive energy source when costs are internalized, while solar thermal is close behind. Developing economy of scale in solar and wind, and utilizing big box and other rooftop systems for commercial buildings, as Starbucks and the City of Denver have done, would further reduce energy use to start. Wind is already our least expensive energy source when costs are internalized, while solar thermal is close behind. Developing economy of scale in solar and wind, and utilizing big box and other rooftop systems for commercial buildings, as Starbucks and the City of Denver have done, would further reduce energy use to start.

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What do you feel is the biggest hope for the future of the festival? How will you ensure that the festival will continue?

Another hope of the festival, along with greater protection of marine life and fisheries through the establishment of effective marine reserves and ecotourism opportunities, is to do. People often say it has been life changing.

Could you explain a little more about climate change and ocean acidification, and what this will mean for the future? When we burn fossil fuels and release CO₂ into the atmosphere, trees absorb some CO₂, while some escapes into the atmosphere, where it acts like a ping-pong paddle of sorts, re-radiating heat back to earth and causing our climate to warm and destabilize. The more CO₂ greenhouse gases that are added to the atmosphere, the more heat is re-radiated back. The oceans absorb the remainder. This CO₂ is causing the acidity of the ocean to increase. As a result, the shells of shellfish organisms are starting to break down in some places. Should acidity continue to increase, this would become widespread, and would ultimately make it difficult for shells to form in the first place. Shelled organisms are the basis of the ocean food chain, which means this could cause the entire ocean ecosystem to collapse.

Do you feel supported by the local community and businesses?

The festival is young, as far as film festivals go, and wouldn’t normally be as large or expansive as it is, if it weren’t for the support it has received. The festival only happens because of the community, businesses and individuals who support it, and this support will continue to make all the difference.

Was it a difficult to bring in fruition? In seven years, I’ve taken seven or eight days off. It’s been like racing in concentric circles each year, trying to add a little more to the foundation, and then still pull all the pieces of the event together. It’s an intensive effort year-round—there are months on end when I spend 10-15 hours a day at my computer—but it feels like what I should be doing. And… it’s taken all I have.

A number of years ago, in the pastoral town of Waimea, I had the good fortune of watching a number of incredible films in an ocean-related film series, one of which went on to win an Oscar for Best Documentary Feature. I remember feeling incredibly lucky to see such spectacular visual features on my favorite subject—the ocean—and to be part of the audience brought together by what went on to become the Waimea Ocean Film Festival. Recently, I had even greater fortune to catch the constantly “on the move” founder of the film festival, Tania Howard, and learn about how substantially the festival has grown since then, and the relevance and impact it has in addressing some of the major crisis facing our oceans, and thus our societies, today.

A festival of films, supporting the environment, the arts and our community. My number one priority is the environment, and that includes the arts. Our island is our home, and we need it now more than ever. More than ever, we need to come together to protect and improve our island home. We need to come together to protect and improve our island home.

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