

SAVE OUR OCEANS

SAVE OUR FUTURE

A GATHERING OF GREAT MINDS AT THE
WAIMEA OCEAN FILM FESTIVAL

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IMAGE BY RAY COLLINS



TANIA HOWARD



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 also 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 on addressing some of the major crisis facing our oceans, and thus our societies, today.

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 how Europeans were overfishing the African coast, to the extent that Africans who had fished for generations were no longer finding fish, and emigrating to Europe as result. There was a great quote in the film about how Europeans want the fish, but not the immigration of people.

Because so many people here depend on fish for their livelihood, or as part of their subsistence or diet, it seemed like we should understand what was happening as well. After discussing the idea with a few people, I rented a theatre five weeks later, found six films that collectively told a story of what is happening in the oceans, and dove in for what was meant to be a single showing.

Following that first showing, people asked if I would take the films around the islands, then around the mainland, and around Canada. One attendee expressed the thought that there was ‘no hope,’ and so I started to speak before each film, pointing positive towards solutions. I found that I received a great deal of applause for these introductions, and a few standing ovations, particularly in regards to energy solutions, as people were then able to absorb the content of the films within a positive framework.

After seeing the film on ocean acidification eight times, and coming to understand the full implications of what this would mean, I started to feel that showing the films was the most important thing I could do as a mother to my daughter. With that, I decided to re-focus on a full film festival event, with the idea of broadening the content to include fun and exciting films, and to bring in speakers to point-positive,

especially around energy issues, sustainable fisheries and plastics. *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 these 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.

Are there specific themes you use for the films shown at the festival?

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 Hawaiian 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.

Does the festival just consist of showing films?

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 somewhere 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. Being 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 space for solar generation could make up the rest, perhaps using pumped water for storage.

Transportation accounts for 29% of the energy we use, half of which lies in shipping goods back and forth. Transportation is perhaps the most complex of our energy issues to solve, as it involves urban planning decisions and infrastructure investment. If we made these decisions based on economics and a user pay model, we would already have a good multi-modal transportation system in place, based around rail, pedestrian and bicycling systems, with roadways integrated into the whole, and high-speed rail between urban areas.

Rail much more efficient, and hence less expensive, than the automobile system. For a sense of perspective, you can move as many people in one rail line as in eight lanes of traffic. Rail (generally)

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costs substantially less to build and maintain than adding lanes to the automobile system, although this isn’t usually well explained. What’s more, people *love* trains, and trains can ultimately be run off electrical systems powered by solar and wind. Rail is really the key to solving transportation issues at the core.

Do you have a sense of how people have been impacted by the festival?

We hear story after story about what the festival has inspired people 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 and 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 shelled 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 difficult to bring to 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.

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