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Movie Review

Sharkwater (2006)

NYT Critics' Pick This movie has been designated a Critic's Pick by the film reviewers of The Times.

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The ocean is just large enough to contain the ambition of “Sharkwater.” This beautiful and horrifying debut feature by the underwater cameraman Rob Stewart of Toronto characterizes the depletion of the world’s shark population as an ecological catastrophe with dire consequences for humanity.

Sharks sit atop the nautical food chain and subsist on midlevel ocean life, which in turn feeds on plankton, whose biological processes absorb carbon dioxide. “Sharkwater” argues that the extinction of the shark — a creature whose population has been depleted by 90 percent in the past 30 years — could unbalance the ocean’s ecosystem and accelerate the process of global warming.

According to Mr. Stewart, the animal is being eradicated mainly to feed Asian consumers’ craving for shark fin soup, a \$300-a-bowl status symbol whose popularity is fueled by the widespread, demonstrably false belief that sharks don’t get sick. Sharks are harvested via long-line fishing, a technique that stretches fishing line over tens of miles of ocean. Fishermen then hack off the sharks’ fins and dump them in the water to die.

This practice, known as finning, is illegal in many countries. But Mr. Stewart says the governments that pass anti-finning laws rarely enforce them because of staff deficiencies and the influence of organized crime, which controls the global shark fin trade.

Mr. Stewart learned about finning when he joined the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, a Greenpeace-style group led by the activist Paul Watson. The most tense parts of “Sharkwater” show Mr. Watson’s crew patrolling the waters of Costa Rica for shark finners, at the government’s request.

At one point Mr. Watson’s crew halts an illegal fishing operation by drenching the boat with water cannons and then ramming it, only to be arrested later for attempted murder — a reversal for which the film blames the influence of Taiwanese mobsters operating illegal shark fin processing plants in Costa Rica. The intrepid Mr. Stewart violates house arrest to capture hidden-camera images of plant interiors and shots of severed fins drying on a warehouse roof.

Mr. Stewart dilutes the movie's urgency by framing the subject within a "personal journey" format and selling himself as a hunky, sensitive martyr.

There's nothing wrong with highlighting Mr. Stewart's shark-obsessed youth and including shots of him hugging the creatures and rubbing their tummies as if they were big dogs. These touches dovetail with a desire to refute the demonizing influence of "Jaws," the Discovery Channel's "Shark Week" and the like; they're of a piece with Mr. Stewart's comments about the creatures' intelligence and biological complexity and his insistence that most shark bites are exploratory rather than aggressive.

It's harder to defend the film's long, pointless account of Mr. Stewart's hospitalization with a blood infection and its numerous shots of the hard-bodied young director posing like Tiger Beat's answer to Jacques Cousteau. (The film's PG rating should include a special warning for parents of tween children: "Caution: Images of Mr. Stewart in a Speedo may induce puberty.")

But the issues here are so dire that you can hardly fault Mr. Stewart for trying to sell his clarion call by any means necessary.

Mr. Stewart's movie audaciously characterizes the pillaging of the oceans — and the world's indifference to it — as a moral blot on human history equal to that of the slave trade. It builds its case with quotations from sympathetic conservationists (including Mr. Watson) and mournful sequences depicting the capture, butchery and abandonment of sharks, shot and edited to evoke the horrors of the Middle Passage. Brazenly melodramatic and furiously angry, "Sharkwater" aims to be nothing less than the "Uncle Tom's Cabin" of aquatic conservation: propaganda with teeth.

"Sharkwater" is rated PG (Parental guidance suggested) for images of animal cruelty, thematic elements, language and some smoking.

SHARKWATER

Opens today nationwide.

Written, produced and directed by Rob Stewart; director of photography, Mr. Stewart; edited by Michael Clarke, Rik Morden and Jeremy Stuart; music by Jeff Rona; released by Sharkwater Productions. In Manhattan at the Village VII, 66 Third Avenue, at 11th Street, East Village. Running time: 89 minutes.