

Hollywood Unscripted Ep 04 -Sea of Shadows

Announcer: From Curtco Media, there's no place like Hollywood.

Scott Tallal: Hi, I'm Scott Tallal with Malibu Film Society. Welcome to another edition of HOLLYWOOD UNSCRIPTED. Today, we're going to have somewhat of a departure. We're gonna get into a documentary that if you haven't seen it, put it on your must see list. It's called Sea of Shadows. And here's the premise. About 20 miles south of the U.S. border is the Sea of Cortez, which Jacques Cousteau described as the world's aquarium. It's home to thousands of diverse species, including marine mammals such as sea lions, dolphins and whales. And one of those is the world's smallest whale, the vaquita, or at least it was until the Chinese mafia teamed up with Mexican cartels and local fishermen to harvest the totoaba fish. Totoaba's swim bladders are considered to be such a delicacy that they can sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars each. And that's why the harvesting of these fish has become such a big illicit industry. It's so valuable. They're calling this the cocaine of the seas. It's a problem that's so dire that a courageous group of filmmakers, scientists and environmental activists got together, risking their lives to bring this issue to the world's attention. Sea of Shadows was honored earlier this year with the World's Cinema Documentary Award at Sundance. Joining us today to talk about the film are Richard Ladkani, the director.

Richard Ladkani: Hello.

Scott Tallal: Dr. Cynthia Smith, who's executive director of the National Marine Mammal Foundation and also program manager of VaquitaCPR

Dr. Cynthia Smith: Hi.

Scott Tallal: And Jack Hutton, drone operator for Sea Shepherd Conservation Society.

Jack Hutton: Hi

Scott Tallal: Thank you for joining us today. Richard, you've been making these environmental documentaries for 15 years now. Talk to us about why you got into this and how you went from there in 2004 to today.

Richard Ladkani: Well, look, I've been, you know, shooting a lot of films, more than 50 now, and I've directed about 10. So I'm a cinematographer and also director. So I spend so much time making films and entertaining people and educating people that there came a time in life where I was thinking, how can I make something more for the people and for the planet as well? And it was actually Jane Goodall. I was invited to shoot a film on her as a cinematographer called Jane's Journey in 2009. So I spent a year with her traveling the world and she was the one that kind of really opened my eyes to the planet and it's problems and also showed me how in nature everything is connected. So it's not just like the humans and the animals and the forests and the oceans. No, we all depend on each other and we need each other. And if any of these things goes into trouble, then everything will be thrown off balance and we'll have big problems. So she told me back then, look, you're a talented filmmaker. If you could just focus on topics that matter in this world, you could start making a difference today. You just have to make good films and then try to make them available for millions of people. So I was like, okay, that's easy, but I have no idea what I'm gonna do now with that mission. So then it took about five years that I was like thinking about this. And then came this idea to do a film on the extinction of elephants, because I read an article in The New York Times, Ten Years to Extinction of the Elephants. And I was like, wow, nobody's ever heard about this. This should be a global topic. We have to raise awareness. They're killing them, slaughtering them. So that's when the Ivory Game happened and came together, which was, you know, a Netflix original, executive produced by Leonardo DiCaprio. And I had a great production company, Terra Mater, who was willing to take these risks with me. You know, not just financially, but really go out there and make great film and then try to sell it to like an international global network that can reach millions of people. It was very successful, was shortlisted for an Oscar. But most importantly of all, it actually changed government policy in China. The movie came out in November, and only two months later, the Chinese government banned the trade of ivory, which was the single most important message of the film. If they banned the trade of ivory, we can save the elephants. They did and the same day that they did. They invited us to China, to Beijing to open a Beijing film festival and show this film to the Chinese people and talk about it. And then we even won for best film and they thanked us for what we did. So this really empowered us. You know, this was really like, wow, a movie can have such a strong impact that it can change the Chinese government into action, inspired them and really save a species. Of course, there were many players involved. I mean, I don't want to

discredit any of the big NGO's fighting this for years and decades even. But it seemed we were deciding final factor. So we were empowered and then we started thinking, what can we do next? And that's when the idea Sea of Shadows came. And it actually came from our executive producer, Leonardo DiCaprio. He suggested making a film on that topic. Cause this animal really needed help. And a movie can be a total game changer.

Scott Tallal: Did he ever talk to you about how he found out about the issue?

Richard Ladkani: It was not a big question for me because he has a huge team of people bringing him urgent topics in the world all the time. So he focuses on certain ones that he loves. And vaquita was obviously one of them. And he told us, like, look. I can open doors for you. I can get you in touch with also one of the most famous journalists in Mexico who has been covering the topic. Carlos Loret de Mola, who became the main character of the film. I can get you into the government like Navy operations and things like that. And also, I could get you on one of the boats of the VaquitaCPR. mission, which was just about to begin six weeks from his call. Like that was the only big problem. He called us on August 22nd, 2017. I remember that day because you don't forget when Leo calls, but basically said operation starts first of October. So if you want to do this six weeks from now, you need to be on location. And that was like, very daring. It was like, can we pull something like that off?

Scott Tallal: How do you budget for that with so little time?

Richard Ladkani: Originally, we just budgeted for the first phase of the movie, which it may have ended up being a short because all we did is like, okay, let's cover that operation, that VaquitaCPR project. That's gonna be five weeks. He said, let's go in for three weeks with the producer Walter Koehler. And we said, if they're successful, let's see where that takes us. And then we understand what kind of movie that can be. So you don't say, okay, let's budget the whole thing. You kind of budget that initial phase. It's kind of like a development phase in a way and say, okay, let's do this because it's urgent. And then figure out what kind of movies is this gonna be. Is this gonna be a short. Is this gonna be a wildlife doc, or is this gonna be a feature length theatrical. I was hoping, of course, for the latter, but we didn't know initially. So it was kind of like just jumping in and hoping it was gonna work. But if I just may mention, it was also

critical that I had a very good relationship with one of the main characters of the Ivory Game, Andrea Crosta from the Earth League International, who's really like an intelligence agency for the planet. His organization, they're like undercover FBI agents going in and fighting for planet Earth by exposing criminals at the highest levels and then handing out information to governments and media. He was a key player in the Ivory Game and he already was doing an investigation in Mexico at the time on the totoaba and vaquita problem, especially in the totoaba trade. So he told me about this actually before Leo called. But I would just like I didn't think it was gonna turn into a movie because I was like, vaquita has never been filmed before. I doubt we will ever be able to see one. If we can't see a vaquita how am I going to emotionalize people to the problem and vaquita may actually be extinct before we even finance the film. So, you know, it sounded back then already so problematic, so dire that I was like, I don't think we can pull this off. And then Leo's call changed everything.

Scott Tallal: So, Cynthia, you were already involved when Richard and his group came into this. Talk to us about this experience from your end.

Dr. Cynthia Smith: Sure. Yeah. We were involved. And by we I mean all of the scientists and veterinarians that were really focused on the issue prior to the vaquitaCPR effort getting launched.

Scott Tallal: For how many years? I mean, when did you first become aware of this?

Dr. Cynthia Smith: I first became aware at a marine mammal medicine meeting and the lead veterinarian for VaquitaCPR, her name was Francis Gulland. And even in our community, where that's what we do for a living so we know a lot about different creatures and we knew very little about the vaquita. So it was truly a conservation crisis. By the time that vaquitaCPR launched and the whole idea of it was there's this little animal that lives in one place on the planet in the Sea of Cortez and its numbers are rapidly declining. In the beginning, it was because of overfishing in general, just unsustainable fishing. That then was completely overtaken by organized crime. And so then it just picked up and it got faster and more serious and more dire. And so at that point, as veterinarians and scientists are watching and trying to help, but not feeling very empowered, there started to be this conversation. Are we going to simply just document their extinction or are we gonna try to do something about it and get more

involved? So the vaquitaCPR effort was based on trying to go in and protect them from harm and remove them from the dangerous situation they were in simply to buy them more time and to buy all of us humans more time to figure it out and to figure out how to stop the killing, how to make their home safe again. And so that's the story that you'll see in Sea of Shadows.

Scott Tallal: Where you talk about the numbers when you first got involved, how many vaquita were there?

Dr. Cynthia Smith: Gosh, when I first became aware and started to really understand the issue. I mean, there were still more than 100. And then over the, very quickly, the numbers dropped. And so by the time that I met Richard and we were talking about the VaquitaCPR rescue effort in launching, at that point, I believe we were down to 30. And so, you know, that's a ridiculously small number of animals that you're going to go try to find and rescue. And so since then, the number has just continued to dwindle. So that's the most endangered marine mammal on the planet currently is the vaquita purpose.

Scott Tallal: Talk to us about from a scientific standpoint, what else can you do? What was your approach? What were you thinking when you got into this?

Dr. Cynthia Smith: Yeah, and I mean, the ultimate goal for all of us. All the time and still is today is to make their homes safe. I mean, that's the ultimate goal. So all the other things you're doing are simply just to buy yourself more time so that you can achieve that ultimate goal of making home safe. That's the overarching theme, so to speak. And then underneath that, then you're starting to think about, OK, well, we could pull the nets out of the water, which is what Sea Shepherd's been focused on, and that will buy them more time. We can do the intelligence operation, which is what Andrea has been focused on and making sure we understand the crime and the corruption and the illegal trafficking. And then our piece, the VaquitaCPR piece, was this whole concept of rescuing them and putting them in a safe sanctuary somewhere where they weren't going to have to worry about nets and poachers and where they could just be protected until it was safe to put them back where they belong.

Scott Tallal: Now, Jack, how did you first find out about Sea Shepherd? How did you become involved with them and why?

Jack Hutton: I was 18 years old and I was in university. I was doing aerospace engineering and I was constantly reading all these headlines that we read every single day of 1 million species are directly threatened with extinction due to human activities. We have 14 years until climate change changes the way of life for every living being on the planet. We have 90 percent of the oceans that are overfished. 30 percent of the oceans that are already collapsed. And reading all this in university I was sort of thinking to myself what am I doing here? Why am I studying for a future that I don't have? What is the point of me getting a job, going out and getting a car and a house and having this career in a planet that is dying? That doesn't seem to make much sense to me. So I'd seen a YouTube video online of a crew in the middle of a sea of Cortez cutting a whale out of an illegal net, freeing that whale alive. And I was like, that seems like something I could be good at. I knew drones from before, so I had something to offer.

Scott Tallal: In what way? What do drones do and how do they help with the process?

Jack Hutton: Well, I was a racing drone pilot and I didn't know how exactly I would help. I just offered I sold all my things. I dropped out of university whenever I was 18 and I bought a one way ticket to Mexico to join this crew. So what we do at Sea Shepherd is we put ourselves in the way of an exploitive industry that is murdering the planet. We use drones to go out and track the poachers. We use ships to go out and track the poachers. And then we take, remove and destroy and recycle their illegal nets. That's how we operate. And up until this point now, we've taken over 900 of these nets out of the ocean, off a really small, small area. And this is, it's illegal for these nets to go in there. This is a UNESCO World Heritage site. So we can patrol it with that and we can fight for the vaquita on the frontlines. And if we had not been doing that for the last five years, almost certainly the vaquita would be extinct by now.

Scott Tallal: The Sea Shepherd is world famous and they've come under fire from water cannons and they've come under fire with rubber bullets. This was live ammunition. I mean, in the middle of the movie, people are shooting. Was there ever a point where I didn't sign up for this?

Jack Hutton: You know, there never was. I mean, up until this point, we freed three thousand six hundred live animals from these nets. You don't back down whenever

things get tough. You don't jump out of the way whenever it's like dangerous. In fact, you have to ramp up. You can't back down to the poachers. You can't back down to the people who are destroying the planet. Today, this is still going on. And today we're still seeing boats go into the refuge. We've had to cover our entire ship in barbed wire and a net to keep the molotovs off. We get shot at and things are getting worse there. Once the movie ends, this problem is not over. This is still going on. But the thing is, there's still vaquita there. And so we will keep fighting until the bitter end.

Scott Tallal: Richard, this is the Mexican cartels. This is the Chinese mafia. They're willing to do what it takes no matter what to defend their revenue. How do you get production insurance? How do you train for that?

Richard Ladkani: Well, to be honest, I mean, it's not about insurance, because if something happens, something happens. So you've just got us, you know, stay safe and stay out of harm's way. We did some training already for The Ivory Game, which was also quite dangerous. You know, there were also people getting shot and dying and was similar. You know, we were on raids with secret police, you know, crashing on jeeps through the savanna and like hunting down people. So it was really crazy stuff. So we have some experience with very violent and dangerous situation. We also did hostile environment training. So the key people on the crew all did that, which is very important because you learn what to do in case of a kidnapping attempt or when bullets fly your way, how to get away and you know how to approach a checkpoint and what to do and what not to do. All this is like training. Anyone has to do it that goes into a war zone. We did it going into a conflict zone. And that keeps you a bit above water in terms of mindset. But it's also my personal experience. I mean, I've been shooting documentaries since 1997. And before that, even I was traveling to war zones, conflict zones, I would call them, as a photojournalist. So I was like 19. I went into the Golden Triangle of Burma Laos and met with rebels and got into middle of shootings and like rocket propelled grenade attacks and things like that. So I've been with this life for a long time and just sort of get used to it, but you never lose the fear. I looked at this whole thing as a military style operation from production side as well. I got nicknamed El Commandante. They gave me this captain's hat. Every morning we would meet and we would talk about the dangers and the risks and the missions. And we would always be like, okay, anybody can veto and can not go along. I'm not going to push anybody. But this is what we're getting into. Are you on it? Do you all want to do it? You know, there's

soundman, cameraman, drone pilots. The good thing was that Terra Mater, our production company, was willing to really provide high security for us as well. So we had for the first time six bodyguards with us. They were armed, they were trained, they were hiding us crew. They were like our drivers and facilitators, not the guys with the sunglasses and suits, but like undercover in a way. But yes, armed. And they would just have our backs. You know, they would guard the house that night. They would listen in. In the village and have their own informants about what are people talking about, the fishermen in the bar or whatever. They were also key. Like, for example, there's one scene in the film where riots break out and like, people start hauling large rocks at us, like, I mean, hundreds of them. And it was like a mob attacking us. And we were with the Navy and we were trying to retreat into a base. But then the base got attacked. We couldn't get in. And everyone is running for their lives and suddenly people start shooting. So this is the worst, the worst kind of situation you want to be in because it's not in control. But I kept filming. I had a camera on my shoulder. I made sure that camera's rolling because that's why we were here to document what was going on. And at the same time, I was relying on the bodyguards to not shield us. You know, they can't shield us. They're just human beings. But to tell us what to do. So when they saw a window of opportunity, that's when they said run, run behind me and follow me. And that's what we did. And we ran and they got us into the Marine base as soon as there was a moment of quiet, like actually the mob suddenly focused on the ships on the shore and they started running towards the ships to kind of capture the ships. And that was our opportunity to get into the base. And bullets were still flying. And the scariest ones were the ones that were actually ricocheting around you. Yeah, like you'd hear a bullet hit a wall next to you, and go "peyoong". And that's when things get scary because then the unpredictable anything's possible.

Scott Tallal: You also mentioned the involvement of Andrea Crosta from Earth League International. This is a real life James Bond. This is a real life intelligence officer. This is a guy who is recruiting other real life intelligence officers. Now they're focusing on saving the environment. Talk to us about that angle.

Richard Ladkani: Yeah, he's a he's a really amazing guy. And he's put a team together that is really it's kind of like the CIA, but working for the planet to save planet Earth. These people are former FBI, CIA, NSA, the best of the best who have found that after 30 years of working for the FBI, you know, hunting down drug lords and cartel. This will

continue for the next hundred years and 200 years like we're not going to change that. So all the risks that they're taking, all the wars that they're fighting, they're not gonna be making any difference. Not in their lifetime. But they have understood that our planet is under attack by the same criminals, but they are now attacking something that has a ticking time clock. Time's running out for these species that they're trading with. And this is the fourth largest black market industry in the world. This is billions of billions of dollars. But they're taking from nature. They are feeding off our planet. And it's a very easy war for them to fight because there's very low risk. Governments do not take this very seriously right now. They always think, oh, it's environmental problem or something. But these are real crime problems. So Andrea, in that regard is quite unique. And his organization, Earth League International, is very special because they target those crime syndicates and they try to find a source of the problem. And in this case, in Sea of Shadows in this black market, it is the Chinese in Tijuana, the Chinese mafia that is actually hiring the cartels to do the dirty work. And he exposes them. And you will see that live in the film of how he goes in to find out who is behind this and then get the evidence that can even hold up in court if necessary. But get that evidence to governments, get it to the media and of course, have it seen in our film for maximum impact. So people understand if you do not target these people. This is never gonna stop. What a jewel to be working with him. I mean, that's the best of the best. You know, you're live in the middle of a James Bond. Jason Bourne type film. But it's real.

Scott Tallal: The issue wasn't just the Chinese mafia and the Mexican cartels. You mentioned the fact that the fishermen were an issue and the film does a beautiful job of exposing this. They're almost being suborned into having to do this.

Richard Ladkani: Yeah, it's like extortion. I mean, wherever the cartel goes, they rule. They are more powerful than the government in most of Mexico. And that's what you have to know. It's very, very scary. I mean, look, we have a scene in our film where three fishermen got arrested, three poachers. I wouldn't call them fishermen. Three poachers got arrested by the Navy and then 300 poachers showed up and used force to get them out. And they won. And that is the scary part. And when you see that, you feel overwhelmed. But our film, what it should do, the purpose of it is we need to shame the government into not standing up enough, you know, to the truth for the planet. And we need to like have the whole world look at this and be like, how could you let this happen? How could you let them get away with this? You need to focus your attention,

really, on fixing the problem. You can't just go in and pretend to solve the problem. You have to go all the way. And any solution has to be with the fishermen. They need a sustainable way of fishing. They need to be living the life, they need to feed their children. Obviously. But in order to do that, you need to take the cartel out of the equation. You need to really put force on the cartel. Right now, there is no force. They're not going in fully armed. They're actually quite afraid of the cartel. And the reason they don't go in all the way, it's always like an 80 percent kind of effort, like a more of a show. It's because they just don't care enough. They just think it's just like some like fish they're taking like, who really cares, you know? They don't see the bigger picture that they are destroying the fishing grounds for generations. These people are not only killing the vaquita, they're really killing an ocean. And that is irreversible.

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Scott Tallal: And you also have to deal with the Mexican navy because unfortunately, Mexico has been played at every level by corruption for centuries. Talk to us about that, if you will.

Richard Ladkani: Corruption. Look, it is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, Mexico. So that is no surprise. What was surprising to me was that the Navy, even though it was so heavily armed, you know, it had gunships, helicopters, you know, even stealth ships. I mean, like the helicopter launching pads, like drones, military, like you'd only see it in the war movies, Iraq war or something. I mean, they have all the gear. The problem, though, is they're not equipped to fight civilians, a civilian war. These are people that are hiding behind, 'Oh, I'm just a fisherman'. You know, like it's cartel, but they're very smart. This military units that are there, they have live bullets, but they can't use them against civil unrest, against civilians rising up to them unless they're being directly shot at. There is absolutely nothing they can do with that power. And fishermen know that. They are very smart fishermen. So they use this like, oh, you know, we're just trying to go out and fish a little bit and get this and that. But yeah, when Sea Shepherd sends a drone, they just shoot it from the sky because it's way it's just a drone. So these things happen. Corruption is a huge problem. But I think the bigger

problem is the threat of the cartel. I will never forget the vice admiral of the entire unit of the Marines in San Filipe. You know, he he was running 300 Marines there, all the ships and everything. And he told me the real reason. But he didn't want to tell me that on camera. The truth about why they are not taking them down is because they're afraid. He said they know where my daughter goes to school. They know my wife. They know everything. So they will first take my daughter, kidnap her or kill her. Then it will kill my wife and then they will kill me last. So if we hurt them, that's what's going to happen. And it's just not worth it. That's really sad because, you know, I understand him, but he's the military. He's the force that is needed to stop them. And if he says they are more powerful than us, what can I say? That was very sad.

Scott Tallal: What else did you have that you felt that you really couldn't use in the film or can you not tell us?

Richard Ladkani: Yeah, we got footage, for example, from poachers that showed what they were doing at sea. I remember video coming to us and things where we were like, OK, how we going to use that? It's gonna be hard because if we use it, people may be identified and they may get in trouble and there will be backlash from the cartel. Like we had whistleblowers trying to get us information, get us evidence of them being armed, of them killing. You know, the totoaba and how they work, even dead vaquitas in the nets and things like that. But there was always this issue, like if we use it, who's gonna get targeted for exposing this? And the risk was very high that there may be a retaliation and people may just get killed. So we didn't want to be responsible for the deaths of anybody. So that was a tough choices sometimes in the edit not to use something to protect people. There was also another I had to kill one of my favorite scenes, it was the typical story of kill your darlings. There was a big Navy operation that we were involved in that used the stealth ship as a base and we were launching with helicopters from the stealth ship. Carlos Loret de Mola was the main character on that. He was investigating Navy operations and they embedded him and we were there. So we were in the middle of like real war stuff. I remember there was a poaching vessel right in front of us and they had a net and they pulled out and the Navy started chasing them and did like get to the helicopters. And we jumped into like a helicopter. It took off and it started chasing that boat. And there were two speedboats coming from the Navy and they were chasing the boat and everything. They put everything they had on getting those poachers. And in the end, they just got away. They went to land. They couldn't get the speedboats

couldn't stop them, because before they reached Santa Clara, which was like a cartel safe haven, they put the boat on a car, drove into the main city. And while we were circling with the helicopter, we saw how they took the merchandise. It took a while, but changed into another car and then got lost in traffic. And by the time anything, like we were just like powerless, it was the most cinematic, intense action you could possibly imagine. It was an eight minute scene in the film we caught. It was like unbelievable, like Hollywood, like. But the real thing. But we couldn't use it because it was just one of the big failures, too many. It was so bad, like there was so much anticipation for them. They must get them. It's not possible that they fail. But the failure was so catastrophic that it would have been for the audience told like, OK, why am I even watching that, I want to puke. This is just insane. And I would never get them back into like a hopeful feeling that this can actually be solved. So we had to take it out. I couldn't believe it was one of the climax scenes of the movie.

Scott Tallal: Now, we've talked about all of the action adventure element of this, but there's the emotional heart and I'm looking at you, Cynthia, because of what you had to experience. Can you share with us a little bit about that?

Dr. Cynthia Smith: Yeah. Anytime. A person, or especially a veterinarian, is talking about an animal and an animal that is in your care. And when things either go really well or they go really bad, those conjure up emotions.

Scott Tallal: Let's set it up because what happened was in the film.

Dr. Cynthia Smith: Getting the nod.

Richard Ladkani: OK Cynthia, you can tell them.

Yeah. So what happened in the film was that we had our team, which was composed of some of the world's best veterinarians and scientists that had many of them dedicated their lives to the vaquitas and all of them completely dedicated to marine mammals and conservation. So this amazing cast of characters that were all there, no pun intended. Obviously, the folks that we brought together were there for very specific reasons. So we were all there to attempt to rescue the vaquitas and bring them into a safe haven and through the process of finding them and then encountering one of these amazing

animals. You are going to see that you go on this journey with us through meeting one of the animals and watching her try to adapt to being in our care, and then what happens when things start to go wrong. And so as the veterinarian that was in charge of leading that rescue effort and then walking with her through her journey, there's a lot of emotion there already. But then certainly when things go wrong, it's very heartbreaking, heartbreaking on a level that I didn't even know is quite possible as a professional, you know, you become a veterinarian because you love animals so very much. And so when things go wrong with this animal, everybody's hearts just broke wide open. And Richard did such a beautiful job that night of just being completely transparent. I didn't even remember that the film crew was there.

Scott Tallal: Jack, what's happening with Sea Shepherd in this fight right now? Is the fight continuing? And what's your role in all of this?

Jack Hutton: Well, yeah, the fight's continuing to this day. What we have done since the premiere of the film is we have taken the film to the United Nations, both in New York and in Geneva, as well as screening it to the State Department in the U.S., as well as screening it to the Mexican Senate, as well as screening it to CITES and CITES is the organizing body for regulating wildlife trade. And through Sea of Shadows and Sea Shepherd and the scientists, we went and we spoke to these organizations and gave them an action plan of what we think should be done. And now CITES has come out with a very harsh embargo on Mexico on all CITES listed species, if not adequate protection is given to the vaquita in the next year. So that means all CITES list of species include shrimp. So a shrimp fisherman in Mazatlan will lose 90 percent of his business if this embargo goes through. This is a billion dollar embargo for Mexico like a massive, massive blow. So Mexico really wants to avoid this happening. So Mexico have sent 600 new troops or are in the process of sending 600 new troops to San Filipe. We have 14 new ships that are going to San Filipe from the government. They're hopefully going to be putting more checks in with regulations on the ramps whenever the boats are being launched, having more environmental inspectors on our ships and coming out with us. And for us ourselves, we're preparing for the biggest year yet. We're going to have water cannons on our ships. We're gearing up with all protective equipment we possibly can. We have our nets on. We have our barbed wire back. We're gearing up to go 100 percent zero tolerance to try ensure that this vaquita could

make it through another year. We're going to be sending three ships there. I'm going to be going back there in six days.

Scott Tallal: By the time our listeners hear this, you will be back onboard.

Jack Hutton: Correct. It's going to be a really tough year, we expect, but we have to do everything we can for this species.

Richard Ladkani: It's very important to also mention that Earth League will send another team of investigators into the field very, very soon. Not going to be very specific, but it's going to be not only Mexican undercover, but it's also going to be Chinese and Asian undercovers to the area to monitor results throughout the poaching season, which is about to begin because we need to understand the government, again, is only putting up big, big, big show, a Hollywood show. I would call it, you know, or if they're actually going to do their job and really impose the law and zero tolerance, arrest people who break it. And if the market is going to be disrupted because they have to go after the Chinese, that is the key. If they do not go after the Chinese, which they have promised to do, EarthLink has shared all the intel about the over 30 traffickers that are behind this. If they don't go after them, it's gonna be very hard to stop this war.

Scott Tallal: You expose some of them.

Richard Ladkani: Oh, yeah, we expose them. But, you know, in the film, we are a bit careful because of lawsuits and things like that. I mean, National Geographic wants to be careful about what we expose. So you can't expose somebody unless he has been tried in court and found guilty unless he's committing a crime live on camera. And it's irrefutable evidence. Then you can go on a big network. But we're exposing the information behind the scenes by giving all the intelligence. Not me, EarthLink is doing that. Giving a full report, 150 pages of everything. We have numbers, faces, videos so they can do their job. You know, and that's what's very important is that we now hold government accountable and make sure it's not just a show.

Scott Tallal: And what is China doing?

China has actually been great. They have acted on the evidence and they went after a total of a trafficking ring in December 2018. So six months after the evidence was handed over, they arrested between December and April 2019, 32 totoaba trafficker's with totoaba worth \$150 million in China. But again, the solution, unfortunately, has to be found in Mexico. But the one great thing that came of those arrests in China was that the price of totoaba actually collapsed in Mexico for a while, but it was in the final months of the totoaba poaching season. But the price went even down to zero first went down to half and then went down to zero. Which means the cartel could not sell their totoaba off the beaches anymore to the Chinese because the Chinese said we're not buying because our whole network is being interrupted, because our buyers in China have been arrested. So suddenly the business collapsed. Problem is, I'm sure they have figured out a solution because they're the middlemen, which is the Chinese Mexicans in Tijuana. They have been not pursued. You know, the government didn't go against them. So they just need to find new buyers in China. And, you know, everything continues. So either you go 100 percent or you will fail to solve the problem.

Jack Hutton: You can't go halfway on conservation.

Richard Ladkani: No, no halfway.

Scott Tallal: Now, when we talk about the fact that this is an action adventure, it's a thriller. It's not like a documentary that we've ever seen before. Did that happen because of the material? Was it something you set out to do or is it a result of what happened once you got all of the footage back?

Richard Ladkani: No, it was part of a strategy in a way. I mean, on one hand, I knew we were gonna be doing a thriller because of the players involved. Earth League International, they're like FBI, CIA, and they do really crazy stuff. So I knew it was gonna be very intelligence driven. Then I knew it was going to be action driven because of the Sea Shepherd part of it and their being in the middle of the action. But I was always thinking when I started to look at films with impact and with very dark topics in the world, I was thinking, how could they be seen by a global audience, by as many people as possible? I've made many, many films before. So I have a whole track record of films that I call arthouse films that are very beautifully made, very cinematic, but also very artsy in a way, crafted films, very little music, you know, a lot of attention on individuals

that you have never heard about. The problem with these films were they won numerous I mean, dozens of awards. But the thing was, they weren't seen by anybody. They aired at like midnight. They were at some festivals. They had a very limited theatrical run and nobody went to see them. And the thing was, because people, they need entertainment, they do not want to go and see a movie that will depress them to hell and be so hopeless and like beautifully shot and cinematic, but so sad you want to kill yourself. When you talk about the extinction of elephants or the destruction of an ecosystem and overfishing and these things, you want to make sure that the film is commercial enough and entertaining enough and beautiful and cinematic enough that it can attract an audience beyond the regular doc viewers, because otherwise you will never have an impact. You will never get a movement of change and inspiration. You will not move governments because like, well, who has seen the film, nobody. So to get it out on a commercial platform, Netflix, Nat Geo, Amazon, any of them. It has to be entertaining and big and grand. So I looked at it. How can it be the most cinematic blockbuster of the film? Right. Because I'm talking about something very dire and very, very sad. Nobody will go for it to see a sad, depressing film, but they will go for it if it's a thriller, cinematic enough, people say is beautiful. Heart wrenching. Yes. But like, buckle up. It's gonna be one hell of a ride. Those are the kind of films that you will go out to see. So there is a whole strategy behind it.

Scott Tallal: And how do you affect that? I mean, is it editing?

Richard Ladkani: You know, it's a choice of editing, fast editing, beautiful cinematography, dramatic characters, being embedded in real danger, getting people a sense of what it's like to be on the frontlines. But I'm also targeting the young people, you know, and young people's attention with Instagram and Facebook is like seconds, maybe a minute. To get them to see a full-length feature and be inspired to become like Jack and join Sea Shepherd or become an intelligence agents for the planet in these things. I need young audiences. I don't need the fifty plus. You know, they may be great in donating, but I need like an action and movement and outrage. You know, I'm targeting people Jack's age. I mean, I need them to see and want to see the film and be inspired.

Jack Hutton: There's almost an obligation when covering these topics to make it sort of scandalous and violent. It's like an Avengers film living there. But you have an obligation

to not preach to the choir. You want to get people into an environmental film that they wouldn't normally go and see or be concerned with because we have an obligation now. Our planet needs everybody and you need to get everybody into the cinema.

Scott Tallal: But there's no artificiality about it.

Richard Ladkani: Zero. It's super real, and that's what it is. You know, every bullet is real and every action, we never repeat anything. One of the styles, for example, that I use is I use multiple cameramen. So I have at least two cameras rolling at all times from two different angles. Like people have worked with me for like 15 years, Tobias Cort's is a guy, I met him in 2002. Ever since, we have been working together. So he knows everything I do. He has my style. I totally trust him. But we cover it this way because we can never, ever repeat anything anyway. These people are on a mission. It's very dangerous. If we ever, ever get in the way, we'll be off the ship. Like Cynthia said, you know, during that rescue mission, if I had made one mistake, I would be either thrown in the water and like, you know, the camera would drown, I would swim away. But if it's in an action like it undercover, you know, if we blow the cover, if we get people into danger because we're being stupid. Oh, could we drive down that block again? You know, because it's really cool. And there's cartel over there, you know, like, no, you get it once or you didn't get it. And that's a style. It's very expensive to do it this way. I need a larger crew, very experienced people. But it's rewarding because you are in the front seat of real drama, real action, real danger, and you will feel it.

Scott Tallal: I get the sense then that you're carrying a big responsibility.

Richard Ladkani: Yeah. I feel so. I mean, I carry a big responsibility for the team, for the safety of the team, because I'm responsible. If anything happens, it's on me, that's for sure. And we were 12 people. So every day was very strategic. And I was being very careful about what are we going out to do and what not and how safe is it. But also, it's a responsibility for our audience to make a good film and make it worthwhile watching. A responsibility to the production company who has invested so much, and giving me so much freedom to do the film I wanted to do without any problems. They never told me don't shoot days or stop doing that. Full freedom, filmmakers dream. And the result is I put in all the sweat and tears and everything is all there. It's all there for you to see the risks. But the good thing is everyone wants to work with me again. My film crew will

follow me into the next battle and there's many more coming. We're already preparing them. So we're on a mission and it feels great to be out there and making a difference.

Scott Tallal: And Leo likes the film.

Richard Ladkani: Oh, yeah, he loves it, he's a big fan, he said "I'm so proud to be part of this film." I'm like, Jesus, like I'm proud and for him to say that, he's great and he's coming out, you know, he's put it on social media and Instagram, he's has been on our Hollywood premiere right there with us until midnight, just showing his face, his support. And, you know, he's talking to me about the next film. So we're gonna continue this relationship. And it's very rewarding, especially also to work with Jane Goodall. She's been a great ambassador. We're good friends. And she's also, I think, quite proud because ten years ago she inspired me to take that path. But on the other hand, she says also she feels very responsible because if anything ever happened to me, it would be on her. And that's very worrying for her. But it's a great relationship to be working with such big giants. And it's a partnership.

Scott Tallal: I have to ask the question. And that is, what's the state of the vaquita today? And can the Vaquita be saved?

Richard Ladkani: Cynthia

Dr. Cynthia Smith: So the state of the vaquita today. The most recent information that we have says that we still have fewer than fifteen.

Scott Tallal: Is there enough genetic diversity?

Dr. Cynthia Smith: Yeah, that's the biggest question. And that's the biggest question that we have. You know, that the scientists have and thankfully we have the answer to that. And the scientists that have been studying vaquitas for decades have been able to piece together that puzzle. And there is enough genetic strength for the species to come back even from such a small number. And yeah, there's a long explanation for exactly why that is. But the short answer is just the size of the population has been smaller than a lot of different populations of animals. So they've already been through the pressure of being a small population. They've already purged out all the bad genetic material that

was there. So what's left is this really pure, clean, wonderful DNA. So now we just need to protect them. And if we can do that, then the animals, we think, can come back. So that's a huge message for the film and for vaquita conservation in general. We cannot give up. It is really late in the game and we are down to the wire, but we cannot give up on them now.

Richard Ladkani: I just want to remind people that the fight is not only for the vaquita. The problem is that even if vaquita does go extinct, the repercussions are going to be horrifying, because what will happen is that all the NGOs and all the government attention that is currently on the topic, they will move on. They will not get more financing. Further ship operations are undercover investigations. The government will have plenty of other problems of where to pull out their troops and put them on the borders or wherever, fight the poachers. So once that attention goes, the cartel is going to completely take over the area, going to 100 percent control the waters, and they are going to kill everything in that ocean to find the very lost totoaba. And they are gonna destroy this place forever. They are going to destroy the fishing communities, because once the totoaba is gone, the consequences will be horrifying. And this, I just want people understand, we're not just fighting for this beautiful animal like, oh, yeah. save the vaquita, no. Save this entire ocean and the people of this place. If the vaquita goes everything will really be destroyed. And that is the big problem.

Scott Tallal: And what can our listeners do to support this?

Richard Ladkani: Well, I think we have presented really the two most amazing organizations in the film that are currently operating in terms of fighting the poachers and the intelligence. You know, if you donate to Earth League International or to Sea Shepherd, you can be sure that every dollar will go into preserving this place and the future of this place, because these are the peoples who are fighting right on the front lines. So they need help. We also have a petition. You can find it on our Website, Seaofshadows.film. If you go there, there is a petition to sign. And if you sign it, an action plan letter will be sent to the minister of environment of Mexico. And he has now already received about a hundred thousand emails, which is, you know, in a great way showing that the world cares because these e-mails are coming from all over the world. And it's important for Mexico to understand that this is not only their little problem, it's a global problem and everyone's watching. And I want them to understand that. Then go

on social media and start talking about this issue. We need Facebook and Instagram to be flooded with this topic about the vaquita. It's now or never. And don't forget, this is a symbolic war of what's happening around the world in many different hotspots with other animals, the tigers, the rhinos, the jaguars, all of them are on their way to extinction because of this illegal wildlife trade. But this is kind of like the most symbolic story you can find in this little place, five hours south of Los Angeles in a tiny spot, 20 by 20 miles with this beautiful vaquitas. And if they go, it will be a disaster for conservation. It will be a disaster for the area. And we should all be ashamed.

Scott Tallal: At this point your theatrical run is finished. So how can people access this film?

Richard Ladkani: Well, it aired November 9th, and it's going to be on online platforms. You will see it on Amazon. You can download it on Google Play. It's going to be on Hulu. It's still playing at many festivals around the world. But the main source would be the National Geographic Channel, and it's going to launch globally December 10th. But in the US. It started November 9th.

Scott Tallal: You set out a few decades ago to make these kinds of films. How do you feel now that you're seeing the reaction to Sea of Shadows? What does it mean to you?

Richard Ladkani: I feel incredibly inspired. I think like all the heroes that I'm focusing on in this film and that are here with me today, because we are all on the same mission, we're doing what we can, we have decided to take action. It's very rewarding when you dedicate your life to something that has a bigger meaning for the world, for the community, for other people. You feel empowered every day. So when you wake up in the morning, you have a job to do. And it's not for your own gain. It's for the general good of the world. And that is a very powerful feeling to make a difference and go out and do something valuable with your time on the planet. So it feels great. Every day. Every day.

Dr. Cynthia Smith: I want to just add to that, because Richard often talks about us as the heroes. And it is so important for people to recognize that we're all seeing him as a hero. I mean, he has a conservation hero now and the scientific community, he's got our attention. This way of filmmaking is so important. Science does have a hard time really

telling our stories. We need storytellers to get involved and help put everything in our brains on the screen and into words and help us get there and make us feel comfortable in doing that. This is such a good example of a storyteller being completely invested in the outcome and being there to make sure the story is accurate and compelling and seen. And so I appreciate what he says about us, which is of course, very meaningful to all of us. But thank God for him and for the film team and for their courage. And I hope that more films like this are made because we need them. The planet is in crisis. And he just swooped right into the middle of it and he told the story. So bravo to him, to Richard and the team.

Richard Ladkani: Thank you. I'm blushing.

Scott Tallal: I can't help myself. Jack, how did your family react? I mean, you're a young kid still. I mean, and you gave up a career in aerospace engineering. Any pushback at all from your family?

Jack Hutton: First of all, my family didn't really know what I was doing. I said I was sailing on a yacht.

Richard Ladkani: Until they saw Sea of Shadowa,.

Jack Hutton: Yeah. I got to take them to the film. And they were sort of like, you're grounded. No more fighting the cartel. But secondly, in terms of looking back, I mean, we have a massive problem with our planet right now. We have a problem with climate change. We have so many of these things that need our attention that for so long have been ignored to the point now where kids do not have a stable future. Like we are at a turning point in history where we're not sure if our species is even going to survive. We're at such a point where people need to do everything. And especially my generation and young people need to look at what's going on and sort of realize that we don't have a reliable planet to live upon. Like I'm in the business of ships. And if I killed all my engineers, my ship would sink. And we are doing that to our planet right now. We are killing it's life support system. And we need to realize that if the oceans die, that's pretty much our entire source of oxygen. If the oceans die, we will die. And we need to take a serious look at conservation and realize that we cannot live the way that we have been so far. The whole system needs to change. I don't have any regrets looking back

and having left. Like, no, I needed to do everything I possibly could for the planet. And I think lots of people are now thinking the same way.

Scott Tallal: Is your family on-board?

Jack Hutton: They are. They're very proud. My father, whenever we did the premiere, it was like, oh, it's like the graduation that you never had. Thanks, Dad.

Scott Tallal: Well, I want to thank today's guests here in Hollywood, Unscripted. I want to thank Richard Ladkani, the director of Sea of Shadows, Dr. Cynthia Smith, and certainly Jack Hutton. You guys have been great. It goes without saying, keep up the good work. And we look forward to the next film.

Richard Ladkani: Thanks so much. Was great being here. Really.

Scott Tallal: Thank you.

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