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Playing With Sharks

Abstract

This is a film review of *Playing With Sharks* (2021), directed by Sally Aitken.

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Author Notes

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Playing With Sharks (2021), dir. Sally Aitken

Valerie Taylor is an Australian diver, conservationist, photographer and film maker, and role model. Now in her 80s, this film talks about her career and influence in diving photography. Taylor started as a competitive spear fisher, one of the few women involved in fishing. From the beginning she drew attention for her skill, and it was through spearfishing that she met her husband, Ron. The two had complimentary careers, and moved into documenting marine life. She became a conservationist after witnessing shark fishing and fin harvesting. She felt sharks were very misunderstood, and not the predators that they were portrayed as.

Valerie was one of the first people to cage dive with sharks, and she and Ron were consulted for various documentaries. Eventually, they assisted with *Jaws* as consultants, and by shooting the footage of sharks. Not without controversy, the Taylors were often confronted about their help in depicting sharks as violent, when Valerie was quoted as saying they were “like dogs,” but the Taylors insisted that *Jaws* was clearly fiction. It seemed that they did not anticipate how

terrified many people are of sharks on a psychological level. Nevertheless, they withstood that setback and continued to shoot film and take photographs for documentaries, and they were featured in National Geographic throughout their careers.

Later in life, Valerie petitioned the Australian government to set up protected areas and habitats for endangered species, and was instrumental in establishing two conservation areas, including a reef. The documentary was a joy to watch; from a philosophical perspective, it can allow us to explore why some animal lives are valued, while others are not. The realization that Valerie had through fishing and observation that spearfishing was no longer a sport in which she wished to participate, and that shark hunting was deplorable, can spur interesting discussions for students of ethics, philosophy, and biology. For gender and women's studies students as well as feminists, the story of Valerie's life is very interesting. For one thing, she was clearly a trailblazer; for another, she was often featured in the press due in part to her gender, but she used her notoriety to inform, teach, and protect the sharks to whom she devoted her life's work.