



CTA-122-Chasing Coral and Warming Planet

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Chasing Coral Shows The Tangible, Devastating Effects Of Our Warming Planet

The documentary—the winner of the photography and visualization category of Fast Company's 2018 World Changing Ideas Awards—shows how our warming oceans are killing coral, in the hopes of inspiring audiences to take climate action.

Director **Jeff Orlowski** and Custom-Built Drone. [Photo: Catherine Yrisarri/© Chasing Coral]

BY ADELE PETERS 3 MINUTE READ

In one of the hypnotic opening scenes in the [documentary *Chasing Coral*](#), a diver swims through a coral reef filled with life: sea turtles, bright blue and yellow fish, and coral in shades of pale yellow, olive green, and muted blues and browns. A little later, the diver—the former ad exec Richard Vevers, who left the corporate world to launch an [ocean nonprofit](#)—joins a researcher on a dive in Florida, where warming water has caused mass bleaching. When they go underwater, all that is left to see are coral skeletons.

The coral bleaching isn't just a tragedy for our oceans, it's also a tangible and direct result of climate change. Extreme bleaching, which happens when corals overheat, once occurred every 25 or 30 years. Now, these bleaching events happen every five or six years, and because corals need about a decade to recover from each bleaching, they're just dying, wreaking havoc on ocean ecosystems. As greenhouse gases from cars or coal trap heat on Earth, most of that heat has been absorbed by the oceans. One recent study found that severe bleaching has happened at 94% of reefs since the 1980s.

The movie, which is the winner of the photography and visualization category of [Fast Company's 2018 World Changing Ideas Awards](#), takes a very different approach than something like *An Inconvenient Truth*, which relied on charts and graphs to talk about climate change. "If we could mesmerize everybody with the beautiful images of the planet, and then show them the changes that are happening because of our actions, that's sort of a powerful one-two punch," says director Jeff Orlowski, who also directed *Chasing Ice*, the Academy Award-winning film that documented melting glaciers. "It's not trying to intellectualize the story of humans' impact. It's making it emotional and visual."

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SVII in Coral Triangle – [Photo: The Ocean Agency/XL Catlin Seaview Survey/Aaron Spence]

Since the documentary launched on Netflix, Orlowski’s studio, Exposure Labs, has held more than 1,000 screenings, focusing on communities in the Midwest and Southeast. “We’ve been working on areas that aren’t usually known for environmental advocacy and we’re trying to figure out ways to help local communities really champion climate solutions, and how do we help communities prioritize sustainable energy and climate action,” he says. “We’re working with a lot of partners to get them more of a voice and to give them the tools that they need to find success in their local neighborhoods.”

In some communities, that action might mean bringing local mayors and commissioners together to come up with new sustainability initiatives or engaging high school students to help influence those representatives. In other places, advocates might focus on trying to shift the stance of local representatives on climate change, or getting “quiet” environmentalists to become more active and pledge to vote.

Exposure Labs did something similar with its earlier film, *Chasing Ice*. A campaign focused on changing Ohio Republican congressman Pat Tiberi’s position on climate change, screening the film with faith leaders, farmers, and others in his district who might have themselves been skeptical about climate science, but became advocates for the campaign. The campaign helped: Tiberi eventually did [change his position](#). (Tiberi resigned from Congress in January, [shrinking the Climate Solutions Caucus](#), a bipartisan group committed to climate action.)

The team is working to measure the impact of the new film, from how it increases voter turnout among environmentalists to how it inspires action in people who don’t consider themselves environmentalists. Anecdotally, it’s working. “I think one of the things that we learned is that almost everybody cares about the planet,” Orlowski says. “There’s just different levels of where people prioritize it, and different levels of how urgent people think it is. . .

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. But when you show them: look–these coral reefs, this beautiful ecosystem is literally disappearing because of our actions–people tend to think about it in different ways.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adele Peters is a staff writer at Fast Company who focuses on solutions to some of the world's largest problems, from climate change to homelessness. Previously, she worked with GOOD, BioLite, and the Sustainable Products and Solutions program at UC Berkeley.

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