

DREAM WITH YOUR EYES OPEN

**BYRON BAY
INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL**



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MEDIA RELEASE

BBFF2018's Closing Gala feature a memorial to remarkable conservationist

Sharkwater: Extinction has been announced as the film at the centrepiece of the Closing Gala at this year's Byron Bay Film Festival.

The film is a celebration of a life well lived, but with the grim awareness of a double tragedy overlaying it.

The meaningful life is that of filmmaker and shark conservationist Rob Stewart, whose devoted activism, shown in 2006's *Sharkwater*, led to major changes in the acceptance of the barbaric practice of shark finning.

The tragedies lie in the knowledge that Stewart's life was cut short in an apparently senseless diving incident in January last year – and in the fact that the devastation visited upon sharks continues. Finning may have been banned by 90 countries but the sale of shark fin soup is still legal and consumption widespread.

Sharkwater: Extinction, which has its International Premiere at the Byron festival, continues Stewart's mission, which was to expose the appalling ongoing destruction of sharks not just through finning, but through bycatch in drift net fishing, and in some weird forms of "sport".

In one distressing scene a magnificent hammerhead is caught, pulled up onto the boat for a snapshot alongside the beaming "sportsman" then released into the water, only to thrash around and sink to the bottom. They rarely survive such encounters, no matter how brief – and Byron Bay's "Shark Girl", Madison Stewart, is there to express what a perverse form of fun this is. It's incomprehensible to her.

For Rob Stewart too, the decimation of the species is beyond belief, and not because he is some grizzled, misanthropic activist, but as someone entranced by the undersea, a beautiful water creature himself, and acutely aware that eradication of this species can only doom humanity. The planet's ecology is in perfect balance: remove its oldest and most important apex predator, and look out.

Sharkwater: Extinction is his legacy, a courageous and inspiring documentary that exposes the massive illegal shark fin industry and the political corruption behind it – in West Africa, Spain, Panama, Costa Rica and France. Shockingly, the practice continues in the waters off California. And while finning is still rampant, endangered sharks are being caught for pet food, cosmetics, fertiliser.

Rob Stewart is a personal hero to many Byron Bay locals. His values were the same as this community's. The Byron Bay Film Festival wants to acknowledge that, and to screen **Sharkwater: Extinction** as a memorial to a great conservationist and a great human – and as a call to action to do what we can to protect this amazing animal.

Rob's parents, Sandy and Brian, said: "We are so pleased that the Byron Bay Film Festival has chosen Sharkwater: Extinction as the Closing Night gala film. Australia was always a very special home for Rob. He was passionate about the beaches, the ocean and the spirit of the people. Rob spent his life defending the oceans and sharks – determined to change the world. His work will continue through the countless people he inspired – many of whom he met in Australia.

"Rob loved Byron Bay and would be honoured by this selection and would certainly want it to be a call to action amidst what we are sure will be a true celebration of his life and mission. We look forward to bringing the film to the festival before it opens in theatres across Australia."

Festival Director J'aimee Skippon-Volke said: "We are honoured to be given the opportunity to share Rob's work on one of the most important nights of the Festival. The Closing Gala provides a space to reflect on and celebrate the positive impact this remarkable man achieved in his short time here on Earth."

Tickets to BBFF's Gala Events go on sale on August 31st at www.bbff.com.au

Byron Bay International Film Festival runs from October 12-21.

J'aimee Skippon-Volke is available for comment

For more information or high resolution photos

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