



PLAYING WITH SHARKS

PRODUCTION NOTES

DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

When renowned natural history producer Bettina Dalton asked me to direct this film, I felt immensely lucky. Bettina's long relationship with Valerie Taylor was an incredible basis for a film about Valerie's life. For any director, the riches of Valerie's story are immense—from a stunning archive to daredevil exploits to a magnetic central character. I'm ever grateful to Valerie Taylor for allowing me to tell her story.

Like Bettina, I'm in awe of Valerie's resilience and passion. She has an intriguing and unconventional life; a female outlier in the ultra-masculine world of ocean adventures in the 1950s, Valerie's incredible transformation from "lady-slayer" champion shark hunter to the most ardent protector of these misunderstood predators brings our empathy and humanity to the fore. I believe when looking at the ocean through Valerie's eyes, we can witness our interconnectedness in the natural world with all life. And so, in making the film, I've been on a journey of new understanding. The shark is the most compelling and formidable of all screen creatures and a wonder to behold. I'm excited by the prospect of changing people's perceptions of these amazing animals through Valerie's incredible, true-life experiences.

When I embarked on the project, I knew her life was an exciting story. What I didn't know was how beloved Valerie is around the world and her enormous influence upon multiple generations of scientists, filmmakers, ocean lovers and conservationists, when Valerie herself is not a household name. Valerie is glamorous, brave, and frankly, slightly formidable with her no-nonsense persona. She doesn't suffer fools. She has little time for frivolity. Her summation of our initial meeting, "Have a very good feeling about us working together," was both a relief and probably also the most effusive comment such a direct, practical woman ever makes. An icon in the marine world, hers is a "Hidden Figures" kind of story. For this female director, in an age of overdue credit to female pioneers, it feels more than apt to give Valerie credit. It also feels good to shine a beacon on her legacy.



Valerie's intimate underwater adventures have been filmed for over 70 years. This extraordinary fact is unprecedented in the underwater world, with perhaps the exception of Jacques Cousteau (whom Valerie influenced). As Cousteau's son so eloquently says in the film, "She had the courage to face up to a species we didn't know about. She helped everyone—including us—showing us you can swim with sharks." The idea that Valerie is still diving and influencing generations of conservationists at the grand age of 85 years old is nothing short of remarkable.

From when she first picked up an underwater camera back in the 1950s, Valerie's stunning archive is a historical record of how things once were in the marine world. What she has witnessed is often not visible today. Valerie's sobering baseline reminds us of the loss sustained through decades of wanton disregard of the marine environment that nurtures us. Some of the film's scenes are literally unrepeatable, as today there are simply not enough sharks left in the sea.

Valerie's life's arc, moving from ignorance and fear to wisdom and respect, brings with it fresh understanding. As a passionate conservationist who knows her time and that of the sharks is running out, Valerie's story is also a meta-narrative, echoing the broader reality of the human-induced Anthropocene, the potential sixth mass extinction of the planet. Indeed, our time is running out unless we act.

Visually, the film is nostalgic. Valerie's late husband Ron's cinematography and exquisite compositions have certainly stood the test of time. From the birth of scuba with colorful retro bikinis and weight belts to the do-it-yourself Australian attitude inherent in how the Taylors worked, audiences will delight in unheard-of behind-the-scenes stories making the "Jaws" blockbuster and the early footage of Spielberg and his iconic film. What is dramatic is the subsequent U-turn that Valerie, her husband Ron and "Jaws" author Peter Benchley took to redeeming sharks' "PR problem." Valerie repeatedly put herself on the front line to prove sharks were not out to get humans, including the astonishing idea of making herself shark bait and changing scientific understanding in the process. Valerie's culpability in the devastating fallout from "Jaws" for the creatures she so admired means we cheer her on in trying to atone for her involvement. It is little wonder her efforts become the first shark conservation in the world and a model for so many.

My only regret is what we had to leave out of the film: Valerie's sustained relationship with a moray eel for over 35 years, her groundbreaking macro underwater photography that wowed National Geographic in 1973, her handwritten diaries stuffed with photographs and letters that span half a century, her incredible art as an accomplished painter and illustrator, and her pink hair ribbons that once saved her from drowning in Indonesia. And these are the stories we left behind!!



In the edit, I found myself drawn to Valerie in the archival footage, not only because the irresistible young blonde literally leaps out of the frame with her “Bond girl” swagger, but also because the interplay between then and now is so strong. With Valerie as a grand old lady of the sea against the footage of her youth, we witness her through the lens of time. Valerie today is still beautiful, captivating and sharp. In the juxtaposition of those two Valerie’s, the ingénue and the sage, I feel, ah yes, this is a journey. How rare to see a younger person metaphorically meeting her elder self or the elder gazing knowingly at their youth. Our film uses these intercuts, and it feels poignant to me every time I see it.

Valerie’s story is, above all, relevant, urgent and globally significant because her concern for the shark should be all of our concern. Sharks are necessary for our survival. As the apex predator, they help keep our oceans healthy and sustain our web of life. We lose sharks at our peril, and we have been losing them through finning and overfishing in horrifying, staggering numbers. Valerie’s perspective is an outlook gained through literally diving in and understanding first hand. Her visceral journey into the realm of the shark from feared “man-eaters” (perhaps she thought she was immune) to “Jaws” hysteria, the birth of cage diving to the era of cageless shark diving, from filming, training, befriending, stroking, loving and even hand-feeding a great white, Valerie was there, pioneering every single milestone. The film reaches its powerful climax, taking a frail but determined Valerie back to Fiji, to the world’s greatest shark dive. This emotional anchoring chapter is replete in memory, as Valerie’s nephew carries on the family tradition, beautifully capturing underwater footage and the joy of abundant life—both Valerie’s and the sharks.

I hope you enjoy this film as much as I have loved making it. As a female director and mother to an 11-year-old girl, a film led by a strong female character and helmed by a strong female producer is one I am so proud to put my name to. I can’t wait for Valerie’s story to inspire you as she has inspired me and so many others and for the big screen to do justice to Valerie’s aquatic life.

Her story doesn’t just read like a “Boys’ Own Adventure” movie. It is one—the adventures of a girl who dared to play with sharks.

— **Sally Aitken (writer/director), September 2020**



PRODUCERS' STATEMENT

Producing a feature documentary that captures the life and achievements of Valerie Taylor is not only fulfilling but a project so right for our times. It was an opportunity to document a life lived and captured during the Anthropocene, a period where our oceans have undergone enormous change.

The first moment I saw the National Geographic magazine cover image of Valerie inviting a shark to bite her arm while wearing her suit of chain mail, it was a lightning bolt, a revelation for me. It was the 1970s. In my world, devoid of TV and comics, she was my Marvel, my Wonder Woman and someone I aspired to be like. Valerie was a woman taking control, venturing into the unknown and experimenting, all with a laser focus on understanding the marine world that was, at that time, so mysterious and foreign to us.

Valerie was the inspiration for my career in the natural world and the progression of becoming a natural history filmmaker. More than 20 years ago, I was invited to direct a three-part National Geographic special about Ron and Valerie's life in and love of the ocean. "Shadow of the Shark" afforded me the privilege of diving into their world and their rich archive of marine life footage. I marveled that they could do so much with so little. Trading fish catches for rolls of film and living hand to mouth, they built their own camera housings, made their own lenses and sewed their own swimsuits. Their adversity spawned not only creativity but inventiveness and sheer determination. No amount of funding could buy what they had in spades—the power of observation and the courage to explore the unknown. Without academic qualifications or institutional support, they forged their own way, observed and filmed the underwater natural world honestly and accurately. The result was a film archive spanning 50 years of natural wonders that now serves as a vital record of the shifting baseline, documenting what our oceans were once like and what we have now lost.

A few years ago, as I sat in a cinema watching "Jane," the Jane Goodall feature documentary. I realized then that Valerie is an absolute living legend right in our midst and knew that I needed to honor this octogenarian before she faded into the annals of time without due recognition of her incredible achievements or sharing her captivating story. I also realized how important it was to preserve the precious film archives as a record of what our oceans were once like compared to what they now are.

It was important for me to have a female director driving the storytelling, and my choice of Sally Aitken as director has delivered an exciting yet sensitive portrayal of Valerie and her life with sharks. Sally has expertly woven a film with universal appeal and captured the essence of Valerie as a renaissance woman worthy of international recognition. Sally also delicately unpacked Valerie's changing



relationship with sharks, from ignorance to enlightenment, taking us, the audience, on that same journey.

We are very grateful for the support of Screen Australia, Create NSW, Madman Australia and Dogwoof, and Tdog internationally. I would also like to acknowledge Valerie for her trust in us; Alan Erson, our executive producer, who always had his hand close to the helm; and line producer Kate Pappas, who steered us safely into harbor.

PLAYING WITH SHARKS aims to ensure that not only Valerie's achievements are honored, but all can bear witness to the fragility of our oceans and feel empowered to protect it, as Valerie has.

— **Bettina Dalton (producer)**