

# Q&A With Stephen Low

The Canadian film director talks about making *The Ultimate Wave Tahiti 3D*, a new documentary about wave science and surf culture .



Director Stephen Low answers questions about his new documentary, *The Ultimate Wave Tahiti 3D*.

PHOTO: SUZANNE MCCABE

**Q: Why did you decide to make your film in Tahiti?**

**A:** The original intention was to do a film about chasing a wave around the world. But our cameras are very complicated, and it seemed like it was undoable basically. So I came to Tahiti, which was one of the main locations that was being considered by the surfing side of our group, and I just fell in love with the place. The connection between the culture and the waves and the natural history—it all was kind of marvelously rich. Instead of just making a surfing film, we could make a film about the wave on a whole bunch of different levels.

**Q: What are the conditions that make for a great wave in Tahiti?**

**A:** This particular wave is huge, and it's very thick at the top. The exact conditions that cause that I'm not sure. This wave—the topography of the ground is that it's very, very deep and it gets shallow suddenly, which creates that thickness.

**Q: Can you tell us about the culture of Tahiti and how that melds with the surfing culture?**

**A:** The Tahitians and all the Polynesians have a kind of different life philosophy than we do in the West. I like the idea of Kelly [Slater] coming here to meet with his friend Raimana [Van Bastolaer].

They're philosophically radically different. Kelly chases the waves around the world, and he competes at the highest level and by his own admission is very, very competitive. Which is kind of the Western philosophy of how to be happy: to beat everyone. Raimana is exactly the opposite. His favorite line is "Happy wife, happy life." So he just surfs the waves for fun. Although he became a great surfer, his thing is it's for fun.

**Q: Is he known widely on the island?**

**A:** He's famous among the [surfers] and among the island people. But the surfers admire him a great deal because this is one of the most difficult and dangerous great waves in the world to surf, and he mastered it first and became famous for doing that. He could have been a great surfer, a competitive surfer, everyone says. But he chose not to. He didn't see any purpose to getting on an airplane and chasing waves around the world.

**Q: Where else have you filmed besides Tahiti?**

**A:** We've filmed a number of islands around here. We're going to film in Bora Bora and Rangiroa—mostly for the diving. We've done a lot of photography of the atolls that have a particular ecosystem, where the nutrients come from the deep ocean

and they feed this enormous variety of fish. So we've gotten a lot of that filmed, and that's part of the wave story.

We've gotten some incredible footage of these beautiful fish floating—huge schools of fish just riding the waves underwater and moving across the coral and coming back again. Waves exploding over your head and a barracuda coming out into the theater. It's all part of the wave story. We're gonna do some astronomy, to explain how waves are created out at sea and how they interact with the land.

The Tahitian thing is interesting because these islands are relatively recent in geological terms. They kind of emerged from the volcanism of the tectonic plates, and then they were colonized. Everything here has arrived from elsewhere, has come in on a wave essentially—the plants, the animals. In order to get to these islands, the people had to surf in like these guys are doing today. There's no other way to get here. This marvelous little kid we discovered yesterday is the most waterborne creature I've ever seen in my life! And the other, older kid [Keoni Yan] is a spectacular surfer. He's just magical on the waves. And the little one—we had him surfing yesterday on the small wave. I asked Raimana, "Can he swim underwater? Free swimming?" Raimana said, "Oh,

no, I don't think so." Next moment I know, he not only speaks English, he's disappeared underwater. He's swimming around underwater!

**Q: Did Raimana say they pick up surfing by osmosis here, that there's no real teaching culture?**

**A:** Yeah. Raimana resisted the teaching thing. But with a kid small enough, it's really just playing on the board with them. And Raimana was cool with that, but he didn't like the teaching idea. He said, "We don't teach them. They learn." There's no lessons, no people standing around like in our culture. You take lessons until you're bored out of your mind, and then you lose interest in it. These kids just do it. They're allowed to just play in the water.

**Q: Is there an overarching theme to the film?**

**A:** There's a number of different themes. The whole ecological theme. For me, it's kind of philosophical. It's kind of a metaphor for life. The "ultimate wave" is happiness of some sort, and Raimana has his ideas, and his idea in the film is going to be if you have the right spirit, if you have the right state of mind, the ultimate wave will come looking for you. But he's not critical of Kelly, because that's his wave. It's his karma to chase the waves around the world, but Raimana's is to stay here, and that's fine.

**Q: Could you talk a little about doing the film in IMAX and 3-D and what it means for how you're going to present your material?**

**A:** Well, these are all pretty high-performance cameras. And so they're difficult to use. What we call the 8 perf 35 camera is the most

exotic. We use about four times the stock that a Hollywood film does. And the other camera is a 4 perf 35. It's running at 200 frames a second, so we can really go into a wave and see it like it's never been seen before. It's going to be like your eyesight.

**Q: Were you ever scared when you were filming out in the water?**

**A:** Yeah, I'm kind of like that kid—I couldn't be kept out of the water. But I got hit by the wave of Teahupoo. We were working in the water and just got careless. You have to dive under the wave as it comes, and if you don't, it pushes you onto the reef. It holds you down. It was a wake-up, because they had warned me. Thirty seconds, forty seconds is a long time to be held underwater, and then I got my head up, and here comes another one. You only get one breath, and there's another one [*breathes in gulps*], and then *boom*, it hits you again and holds you down. Another thirty seconds. So I got a sample.

I don't think I would have wanted to have that experience, but it's a sample of what these guys go through all the time. If you fall, you're gonna be held down like that. And it's not fun. But I guess you get used to it. They train. I'm sure Kelly's been there a hundred thousand times. You just hold your breath. I guess you take a good breath before you go down. It's quite a price to pay. And people get killed doing this. They hit the reef or they break their necks—the water's so heavy that it can break your neck while you're surfing. Not often, but it happens.

**Q: When did you know that you wanted to be a filmmaker? What advice do you have for a young person interested in film?**

**A:** I grew up in a filmmaking family, so, like a lot of kids, I was bored by the process as a little kid. Because everything was waiting for sound, waiting for this, waiting, waiting, waiting. It wasn't exciting. But I think that you have to be interested in the world. Being interested in the process of filmmaking—that's not the point of it. The point is being fascinated by the world around you. And then you've got stuff to say. If you've got the time and money, you can investigate something much more deeply than you could if you were a private person. You often work with the best people in the world, and become friends with them. That's a wonderful thing, but if you're not into the subjects, you've got nothing to say. You can have all the beautiful pictures you want, but I don't care about it. I know some filmmakers who love cameras and editing and the process. But that's the craft, that's not the art of it.

**Thank you**