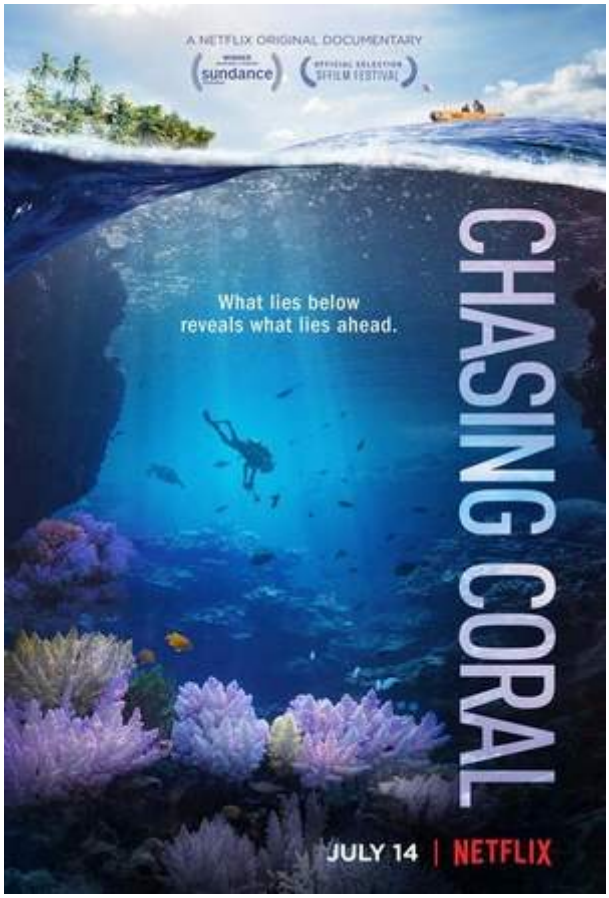
'Chasing Coral' as they disappear



Recently, Netflix premiered a documentary called “Chasing Coral,” which I urge you to watch. It explores a beautiful and tragic event playing out in our oceans right now: the bleaching and death of vast proportions of the world’s coral reefs.

This is a man-made environmental crisis, as egregious as the burning of the rainforests, but because reefs lie hidden from view beneath the waves they can be hard to notice.

The film does a fantastic job of bringing these wonders into your living room, conveying the urgency of their decline and remaining optimistic about our ability to improve the situation.

You may have read about coral bleaching, or even seen pictures in print or online, but have you ever seen it play out in nature?

I can’t blame you if you haven’t—Warwick is landlocked, after all. It wasn’t even clear to me that corals were animals before I graduated from Warwick Valley High School and headed to Miami to start my marine biology degree in 2005.

Since then, I’ve learned so much about how connected we are to the oceans, and to coral reefs in particular, no matter how far inland we live.

A simple example: many of our most effective anti-cancer and anti-viral drugs were developed from studying reef-dwelling organisms. The epidemic loss of corals will affect us all.

Coral bleaching occurs when the algae that live inside coral tissues are expelled under stress. These algae provide most of the pigment in corals, so when they vanish, so too does the coral’s color, leaving behind pale, “bleached” colonies. Corals can’t survive long in this state, though they can recover if the stress is lifted. Bleaching events are becoming more common around the world as sea temperatures rise: just this past year nearly half of Australia’s Great Barrier Reef bleached.

“Chasing Coral” documents this very visual bleaching process as it happens, and captures the emotional toll it takes on investigators trying to understand an ecosystem as it disappears before their eyes.

As a coral biologist, I am of course biased, but I feel like this is a film everyone should view, especially those who have never had the opportunity to go SCUBA diving on a reef.

With enough support, I truly believe we can effect the change necessary to keep reefs around for generations to come.

If the film moves you, please consider donating to organizations that support coral conservation around the globe, such as the Nature Conservancy (nature.org) or the Coral Restoration Foundation (coralrestoration.org).

Dr. John Parkinson is a postdoctoral researcher at Oregon State University. He was not involved in the production of “Chasing Coral.”