

Essay on the Oceans for the Census of Marine Life

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by Jacques Perrin

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For nearly five years between 1997 and 2001, the filming of *Winged Migration* took us around the world in the wake of migrating birds. We swiftly covered a world without borders. In 2002 we decided to broaden our steps, this time by accompanying the ocean's large pelagics, dolphins and fish. It was at that time that we met Jesse Ausubel, who had just seen *Winged Migration* and who offered us the support of the world's oceanographic community as well as help from the Census of Marine Life project. This marked the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration.

Our concerns were similar to those of the Census. We wanted to recall the abundance of the seas that lapped our coastal shores before the development of industrial exploitation; we wanted to make today's assault on marine life palpable; we wanted to arouse a sense of hope by bringing to light the ocean's extraordinary capacity for resilience.

To accomplish this, we chose to evoke wonderment through the force and splendor of images. To sensitize through emotions, which alone can impregnate memory. Therefore, we let the sea itself and its creatures do the speaking. *Oceans* covers the last wild territory of the planet. *Oceans* accompanies marine animals, side by side with them, on their transoceanic voyages, whatever their movements, whatever their speed. *Oceans* allows us to feel, with them, the deterioration of their environment. Our camera is never descriptive. We took the time to come close to each animal; we waited to be accepted in their territory. Our cameramen, veritable impressionist painters of movement, captured the fleeting expressions of these animals. Those few seconds became moments of eternity. We imagined and created new filming techniques and developed innovative new tools because all too often marine animals are observed in a static way, as though through the glass of an aquarium. The care given to the soundtrack is unprecedented. *Oceans* is a pageant, a wild opera, a natural symphony where the spectators have the impression that they themselves are on that other theatrical stage of life.

The sea teems with reflections, shining jewels and precious stones. At moments, scientists and artists are able to glimpse beyond the mystery. The same sense of wonderment leads them. Science enchants the world and nourishes our dreams. Myths and legends are followed by scientific discoveries that connect us a bit more each day to other live beings of our planet and to every atom of the universe. To this day science keeps recounting the grand story of the Big Bang. Man is one of the actors of the story with the same claim as the tiniest of bacteria, the most ephemeral of comets, or the furthest of galaxies. He disrupts the surface of the globe, modifies its climate, and exhausts its biodiversity. Our dazzling technological progress, the appropriation of land and sea, and the submission of the animal kingdom thereby confer absolute power to the human species. But the traces of human genius defile coasts and deep seas. The systematic and irrational exploitation of oceans inevitably lengthens the funeral cortege of extinct species. No animal is trained for survival. The cries of threatened species will remain inaudible. Will the ocean end up being populated only by jellyfish? Will we have the wisdom to change our relationship with the ocean?

We have never been as aggressive nor have we ever discovered as much as we have today. Scientists are rarely divers. For the first time cetologists discovered the animals they've been studying for years, and saw them in their full movements, by experiencing them through our lens underwater. This constitutes a rediscovery and an open field for countless new investigations. The film is dedicated to them and it is our hope that the scientific community will take hold of the film as an element of its pedagogy.

In the fertile dialogue between art and science, a new relationship to the world can arise. The scientists were not mistaken. *Oceans* comes close to an intuitive and sensitive comprehension of marine biodiversity.

Pedagogical views speak to reason; they are insufficient in garnering support for an actual policy of study and conservation in the realm of marine biodiversity. Scientific progress necessitates an ever more technical and specialized language, which is less accessible to the general public. And yet science must plant its seeds within the culture in order for these discoveries to be translated into new relationships with the world. It is the role of art to create the necessary bridges, to create the connections between different forms of knowledge.

During the course of our seven years of work in all the seas of the world, we learned much but we also questioned ourselves continuously. Nature erased our meager certitudes and smashed our *a priori* beliefs. Nature is ceaseless in testing everything. The greatest lesson is that life is an immense fabric of relationships. We have built genetic banks but no museum or zoo can preserve behavior or the interactions among individuals. Relations and behavior are the incorporeal heritage of biodiversity. Species should be protected *in situ*, in their natural environment. How else can we protect the extraordinary hunting techniques of the Valdes orca or those of the Alaskan humpback whale, which are transmitted from generation to generation through a long and patient apprenticeship? What marineland will account for the grace and lightness of a whale dancing?

Isn't nature just a simple reservoir of proteins and primary materials? Why should it necessarily be useful to man? Do we ask art to be useful? We should be capable of preserving the wild side of our world. What will our children dream of if dolphins and whales disappear? What will they draw? Let us learn to accept these spaces that evade our rules and our calculations and that respond neither to our demands for profitable returns nor to our esthetic criteria. Humanity doesn't need only the products of the sea; it needs the unpredictability of the living world. Humanity needs dreams, adventures, surprises. It will not find them in aquatic farms but in wild nature and facing animals living in freedom. Human diversity and the diversity of human artistic production respond to the diversity of the world that surrounds us, especially the diversity of life. The Louvre is not a supermarket. The flight of the manta ray is like the smile of the Gioconda... In the final analysis, the question centers around humanity. The wild world is the patrimony of humanity. Every species that disappears represents a part of our humanity that fades with it. When we were working on *Winged Migration*, the ornithologist Francis Roux told us: "There would be nothing more inhuman than a planet peopled solely by human beings."

If we are capable of making room for the blue whale, the great white shark, the gorilla, and the elephant, for all those cumbersome animals that serve no purpose; if we pay some attention to the golden head goby and the flying fish, to all those insignificant animals that are of no use to us, that we will perhaps never even encounter and whose very existence we ignore, then we will also know how to respect each and every one of us in our differences.

When asking the questions "What kind of ocean do we want?" "What kind of nature do we want?", we first must answer another question: "What kind of people do we want to be?"