

Uncommissionable

by Pete Atkinson



Some of my favourite photos are those that can't be copied. Or at least can't be copied without a huge amount of effort and expense. This used to be the value of rights-managed stock photography (before Getty Images killed the market), enabling a client to license an image, exclusively if necessary, knowing that they can't commission another photographer to go out and shoot substantially the same image.

Often they are created by hanging out in the same place for many days, habituating animals to your presence. At other times it's just a question of

waiting for the right conditions.

During five visits to Beveridge Reef in the South Pacific over a period of 20 years I had these conditions only twice; low water, almost no wind, a biological slick coming off the reef to windward, and exceptionally clear water. Think 60m visibility. I would love to go back, but even if you could spend a couple of weeks there, the chance of those conditions being repeated is vanishingly small.

In Tonga while swimming over a sandy slope I noticed garden eels intertwining occasionally. But to shoot this with a macro lens required habituation



Exceptionally clear water at Beveridge Reef. Nikon F4, 18mm lens, home-made housing, Fuji Velvia, 1/500th, f5.6.

Garden eels in Vava'u, Tonga. Nikon F4, 105 micro, home-made housing, housed SB-24 flash guns, Fuji Velvia, 1/125th at f11

and breath-holding on scuba well beyond my comfort zone.

Pseudanthias regalis
at Fatu Hiva in the
Marquesas Islands
of French Polynesia.
Nikon F4, 55mm
micro lens, home-
made housing, housed
SB-24 flashguns, Fuji
Velvia, 1/125th at f16



Geographical rarity may come into play. In the Marquesas I shot *Pseudanthias regalis* which is rare in a Google search and unavailable on Getty Images. And even if you do get to dive there, the chances are that you will be shooting with a wider lens in anticipation of bigger fish with teeth. In Mopelia on the other (west) side of French Polynesia almost a thousand miles away I was able to shoot the wreck of the German raider Seeadler, not a place you can get to without your own boat.

At Fanning Island in Kiribati in 1991 we discovered large squadrons of manta rays, aggregations that had not been reported before and long before the Maldivian mantas of Hanifaru became fashionable.

The wreck of Count Felix von Luckner's Seeadler just outside the pass at Mopelia. Nikon F4, 18mm lens, home-made housing, Fuji Velvia, housed SB-24 flash guns, f11, 1/60



A squadron of reef manta rays (Mobula alfredi) gathering to feed outside the pass at Fanning Island in Kiribati. Nikon F4, Fuji Velvia, 1/125, f11.

Having steps up the mast is essential!



My best encounter with humpback whales in Vava'u several miles offshore when they didn't want to leave. Subeye Reflex camera, Nikonos 13mm fisheye with adapter, Fuji Velvia, 1/125, f5.6

In a perfect calm at Apataki in the Tuamotus Archipelago of French Polynesia. Nikon F4, 18mm lens, home-made housing, Fuji Velvia, f16, 1/60.

Half and half pictures benefit from flat water and something interesting above and below. In Apataki in the Tuamotus of French Polynesia I had those conditions, even though both lens and dome were far from perfect. Sometimes it's the story that is uncommissionable. Also in Apataki we had a unique encounter with a solitary spinner dolphin, who cavorted with us for several days until the weather forced us to leave.

Once in Tonga we were a few miles offshore in my yacht with a couple of humpback whales. I only had two cameras but the whales were so obliging I was able to shoot my films, get out of the water, change films and get back in where they were waiting patiently.

The yachts (I owned two over 23 years) were a fantastic vantage point with



steps up the mast. Combined with exceptional conditions (and having people to model on board) near the Ile de Pins of New Caledonia I was able to shoot this picture of Nokanhui.

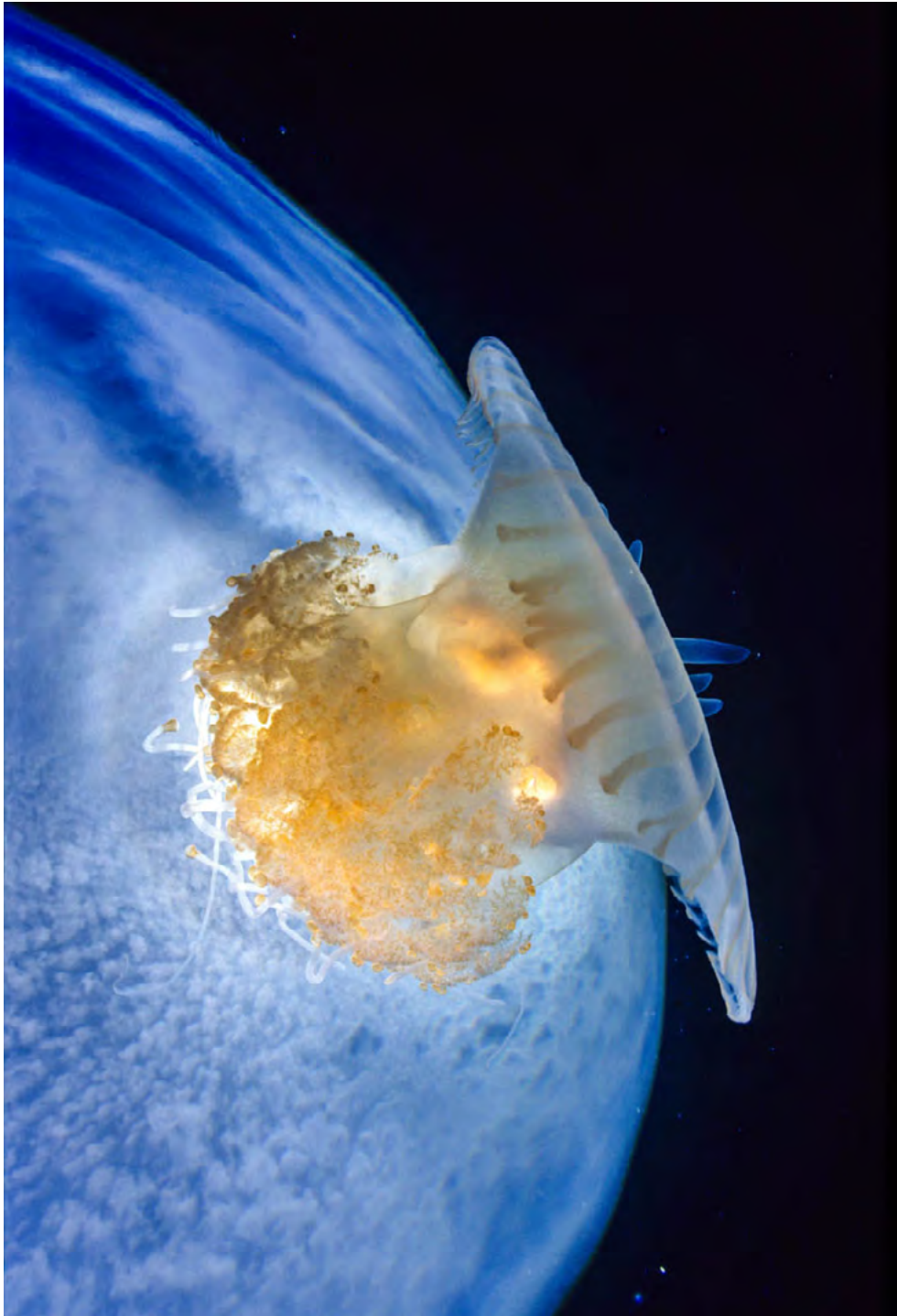
Feeding and habituating animals always produced the best results. At Wailagilala, north of Taveuni in Fiji, Tobi Bernhard found a 1.5m barracuda beneath his boat. We took down a tape measure to check! I had a girl on board who thought she couldn't dive, but we needed a model. Fortunately it was shallow.



With the grey reef sharks at Beveridge Reef, having someone to model with these habituated fish was always a bonus and it was always the fearless Tobi Bernhard.



At Cod Hole on the Great Barrier Reef two cod were performing their mating ritual, oblivious to all, including my wife Darin who inadvertently managed to get amongst the action.



Late one afternoon in Fiji I dropped in the water with a jellyfish. Perhaps I had forgotten my weightbelt. But twisting around underwater to create a shot with the area around the Snell's Window only reflecting only the deep dark water below, and through the window a beautiful stratocumulus sky. Only later by rotating the picture 90 degrees did I see the image at its best.

Finally, I dropped into the ocean 6 miles north of Moorea in French Polynesia. What greeted me were two humpback whales, 100 melonhead whales, some rough-tooth dolphins and a few oceanic whitetip sharks. I jumped back in the dinghy in a hurry when the sharks came to investigate. In retrospect

my fear may have been justified; a French woman recently had both hands torn off doing just this with pilot whales accompanied by oceanic white tips off Moorea.

These pictures had value at one time and could sell for premium prices. The oversupply and Instagram disposability of great imagery has devalued all pictures, even those that can never be commissioned.

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Pete's ebook of Polynesia – An Ocean Realm is available from his website