Brian Skerry

with Peter Rowlands

Brian, thank you for taking the time to answer our questions which I am sure will of great interest to our readers. You are credited as the Creator and Producer of Sea Change: The Gulf of Maine which premiered on PBS on July 24th; written and directed by filmmakers Chun-Wei Yi and Stella Cha it presumably involved years rather than months from idea to completion?

From the television series perspective, the length of time between my initial meetings with network executives until release was about five years. It began with a discussion about producing a documentary series focused on the Gulf of Maine whose underlying theme would be the effects of climate change but would include many related narratives as well. This is a story that I have been wanting to tell for decades. The Gulf of Maine is a 36,000 square mile body of water in the northeast region of North America, stretching from Cape Cod, Massachusetts in the south to Nova Scotia, Canada in the north. It was formed with a unique set of geology and oceanography that resulted in a proliferation of life and, in no small way, fostered the colonization of America. I began diving these waters more than four decades ago. And, while I've always wanted to do a story here, the urgency became greater once this region was identified as an epicenter of global ocean climate change, warming faster than 97% of the global ocean.

Had you worked with Chun-Wei Yi and Stella Cha before?

No.

The delivery of Sea Change: The Gulf of Maine is quite matter of fact rather than hyping and as such it commands more attention and respect for the message. Backed up by excellent underwater photography it must have been hard work both physically and photographically. In general terms what were the sea conditions, temperatures and underwater visibility like?

Diving and shooting in these waters present many challenges that have increased with climate change. These are temperate waters, with temperatures ranging from 4 degrees Celsius to 11 degrees Celsius, and diving here typically requires wearing dry suits. Visibility is generally less than 3 meters and rough seas are common. In more recent times, there are frequent rain events that diminish visibility even further, due to the runoff of the many rivers that flow into the sea. Additionally, climate change has negatively impacted many ecosystems and so many of the animals I used to see routinely, are no longer there.

Having watched the series it is hard not to come away with trepidation at the scale of the job in hand trying to reverse what seems like a sudden collapse of a large marine habitat that had been comparatively stable and productive for centuries. Do you remain hopeful and was your primary motivation to raise awareness to speed up reversal efforts?

The scientific data supports what divers are seeing and have been seeing for a while. We are losing so much in a short amount of time. My motivation was to bring visual context to what climate change means. I feel there has been a somewhat murky understanding of the direct impacts of climate change and how these are connected to people's lives. My hope is that armed with scientific data, personal observations from

a variety of people, and powerful visuals, more informed decisions will be made to implement solutions. I feel that the impacts of anthropogenic climate change for our ocean planet are serious and that we are nearing a tipping point. But there are solutions, and I remain hopeful that these will be implemented.

As a Founding Fellow of the International League of Conservation Photographers you obviously see underwater photography as a key component to changing people's attitudes, was this always in your mind when you started out taking images underwater?

I began diving and making pictures underwater as a teenager. In those days, I just wanted to explore the sea and experience marine wildlife up close and personal. But, over the years, I began to see many problems occurring in the ocean, things that I believed were not evident to most people. I realized, as a photojournalist, I had a platform to reach millions of people and show them both the problems and the solutions. So, while I did not set out with the intention of photographing these subjects or stories, I found purpose along the way, and this guided much of the trajectory of my career. I learned early on that human beings are especially visual creatures and that we respond emotionally to compelling images. We might remember a single frame for the rest of our lives. Photography is a very powerful tool in getting people to care.

The diving conditions on the North East coast of the US must be quite challenging. Was it a hard learning curve but one which has stood you in good stead for the future? Were you learning by yourself or did you belong to a group?

I grew up in Massachusetts and started diving at age 15. A few years later I joined a dive club that had their own air compressor and small dive boat. I was able to dive with more experienced divers from whom I learned. I also started working on a dive charter boat that specialized in wreck diving in New England waters and ran that boat with the captain for about 10 years, gaining a wealth of experience under challenging diving conditions. I believe that this experience prepared me well for diving in pretty much all conditions worldwide.

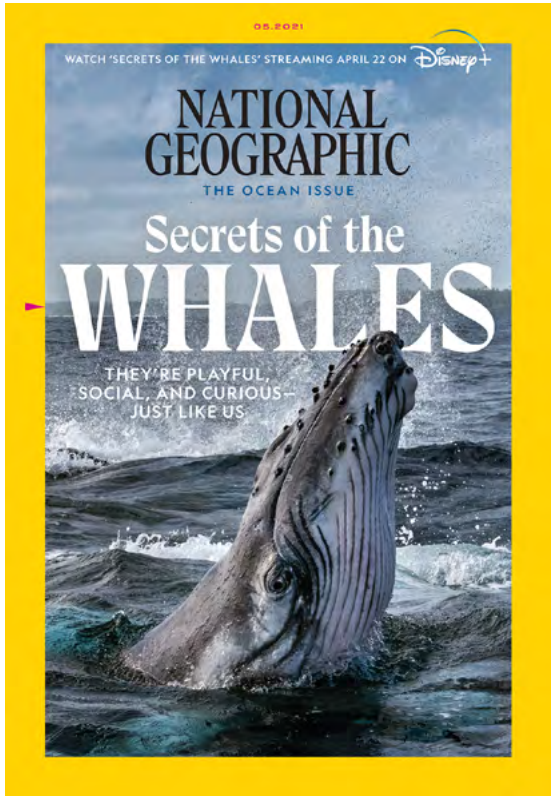
Presumably you grew up and developed (no pun intended) in the film era, what cameras, housings and lighting were you using back then and what was your film of choice?

My very first camera was a used

Nikonos II. I taught myself how to use it and shot mostly with ambient light in the beginning. A number of years later, I bought my first underwater housing which was an Aquatica for the Nikon F3. I tried various films but settled largely on Kodachrome 64. I loved the look in blue water and especially the rich blacks that this film delivered. Toward the end of my film shooting days (around 2004/2005) I was mostly using Kodachrome 64 and Fuji Velvia.

The story goes that Bill Curtsinger was double booked when National Geographic magazine wanted him to shoot of the 1717 pirate shipwreck Whydah Gally, buried in the sand off Cape Cod and he recommended you. Had you worked with him previously and was National Geographic always the direction you wanted your career to develop?

Yes, that is the story. Bill's work was a huge inspiration and influence on me. I had purchased his book, Wake of the Whale, shortly after I began diving. I was enthralled with his photography and the tales of his experiences as a National Geographic photographer. I had read National Geographic from a young age but reading Wake of the Whale really ignited my desire and dream to follow his path. We met somewhat late in his career and dived and photographed together in places like The Bahamas, Australia and New England, where we both lived.



You have done over 30 stories for National Geographic and presumably they have all varied in terms of logistics and difficulty. Do you worry about the responsibility of producing images for such an acclaimed magazine or does it inspire you to go that extra mile for that last elusive shot?

I have done more than 30 stories for National Geographic and nearly every one was my idea. I research

subjects in which I am interested, sometimes over years, and then write a proposal that is presented to the story committee. A key component of my research is determining the types of photos I envision, and the likelihood of success in making them. I do my best to narrow the margin of error for delivering results while on assignment, however, as all underwater photographers know, there are many variables which we simply cannot control. I saw an interview with Steven Spielberg during which he noted that while driving to the set on the first day of any new film project, he inevitably pulls over to the side of the road, gets out of the car and vomits. I completely identify with this. I feel a great responsibility to deliver exceptional results and always know that the bar is extremely high. There's an old saying at National Geographic that goes "We cannot publish excuses," so it doesn't matter if the visibility was bad or a hurricane came through or the animals weren't there, or the boat sank. Either you got the pictures or you did not. With all these things in mind, and my own desire for perfection, I have always worked until the very last moment on every trip for every assignment.

Were you excited by the advent of digital imaging and were you an early adopter? What advantages did you see for underwater photography?

I was a little dubious of digital when it first emerged on the scene and must admit that I dragged my feet in making the transition from film. I used my first digital camera underwater in 2004 and then made the full transition in 2005. Once I made the switch, there was no going back, especially for assignment work. When I was shooting film, I would go off on assignment and shoot hundreds of rolls of film and never know what I had until I returned, sent them to National Geographic for processing, and received a call from my photo editor. With film, I was also limited to 36 frames per dive. Digital was a game-changer. I could shoot more, see exactly how I was doing, and be more experimental. I could also be more efficient in that if I was satisfied with the results of an image I needed for a story, I could move on to something else.

As a Nikon Ambassador we can guess what cameras you use but which housing, lenses and lighting?

For the last several years I have primarily been using Nikon D5 and D850 bodies. With these cameras I have used a variety of lenses but my bread and butter have been the Nikon 14-24mm, 60 mm and 105mm. I have a suite of prime lenses that I occasionally employ as well. I'm using Nauticam housings and especially love their WACP and the EMWL. For many years I have used Hartenberger strobes and in recent years have also brought Retra strobes into the mix. In the last few years, I have been using mirrorless cameras for surface work, especially the Nikon Z8, and really love it. I'm also excited to begin using Nikon Z 6III and really want to bring these cameras underwater.

Do you try and keep your equipment as simple as possible or do you develop any special equipment to get shots that weren't possible with conventional setups?

It really depends on the subject and the types of images I want to produce. In general, I approach most every project with standard equipment that I am currently using. But, there have been many situations in which I will add specialized lighting from generator-powered cable lights to slave strobes or LEDs. I've also worked with engineers to design and build special equipment including pole cams, tow-cams, seal-cams, specialized underwater tripods and remote camera systems.

Do you use scuba and rebreathers? and if so what effects does it have on how you operate photographically?

I use a combination of scuba and free diving for my work. I have also done saturation diving and used submersibles for special projects. I experimented with closed-circuit years ago and recognize their substantial advantages. That said, to some degree, everything has pros and cons but I am comfortable with the methods I use.

The world of learning is totally different than when you started with so much information and imaging out there, do you have any advice or hints that you think would help new underwater photographers aspiring to a career in your world?

I would advise emerging photographers to learn as much as they possibly can (or as much as they desire) about equipment and the fundamentals of photography. Having a firm understanding of the foundational elements of art and photography is essential. Staying current on the tools available to help you realize your vision can give you a broader pallet from which to work and, perhaps, a competitive edge. But I firmly believe that we must pursue our work with passion. Being successful and consistent with underwater photography requires dogged dedication. Without passion, it could become a chore. So, pursue the things you love. If your interest is doing what I do, visual storytelling, then give serious thought to what it is you wish to say. I begin every project with a simple question – "What do I want the audience to take away from this?" Once I have my answer, I create a story plan, then break down the logistics of how I can best achieve the visuals I need to tell this story.

Underwater photographers hold in their hands the tools that truly help people see and can change the world. Find subjects and stories that you wish to document and share. Research, learn, be creative and then make the images and share the stories that help us understand, care, change and fall in love. Build your brand as a trusted source of authenticity to which people can turn for truth. You can make a difference. And you can have fun and find purpose along the way.

Thank you for talking the time to answer these questions and for being such an influential and inspiring ambassador for the underwater photography community.

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Don't settle for 2nd best

Film - No Filter No White Balance

Digital - No Filter Manual White Balance

Magic Filter Manual White Balance

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards. These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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