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Doug Perrine

by Peter Rowlands

Reading about you, I get the impression there was an element of a talent waiting to find a place in your formative years. Was there a moment when those elements aligned for you in the classic 'light bulb' moment?

Honestly, there were many times when life opened doors and beckoned me on the path of my destiny, and I blithely ignored them and squandered most of my youth searching for a direction. I was 34 when I embarked on the tentative beginnings of a career in nature photojournalism. By contrast, folks like Bob Talbot and Gutsy Tuason were highly successful in their teens!

Was there a time when you felt you had what it takes and the desire to go full time?

During the last part of my tenure as a student at the U. Miami marine lab (aka Rosenstiel School), having soured on a career in fisheries science, I began to have some articles with photos accepted at niche publications like Sea Frontiers magazine.

When a new monthly divers' newspaper called Underwater USA ran one of my photos as the cover of one of their earliest editions, my ego kind of exploded and I concluded that I was going to be the new rising star of underwater journalism.

Managing editors are highly skilled at deflating such pretensions, but by the time my self-image was mashed down to size I had already taken a couple of part-time occasional jobs that



(2002) – This picture, from the South African Sardine Run, shows an early stage of baitball formation. The common dolphins have broken off a chunk of the sardine shoal, pushed it up to the surface, and are commencing to feed on it. The other large predators have not yet arrived. Nikonos RS camera with Nikonos RS 13mm lens, ambient light, Fujichrome Provia 400 F, pushed one stop, camera settings not recorded

would give me enough free time and flexibility in my schedule to take on self assignments and do some writing, and had managed to get a few images published in national magazines such as National Wildlife. Nature publications like that were where I aspired to see my work, but they generally don't give assignments, so when I was offered some from dive industry publications I took them to meet expenses while building my portfolio.

What were your primary motivations in deciding on a career as a marine life photographer?

First, there were my personal issues: I really wasn't temperamentally suited for employment by any entity other than myself, and I wanted to spend most of my time outdoors and in wild places. Nature photography was perfect for that.

Secondly, there was a desire to show people things they had never seen before, and to open their eyes to the amazing adaptations and intricate lives of wild animals.

Thirdly, I was firm believer in Baba Dioum's dictum that "In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand and we will understand only what we are taught." I believed that putting photographs and stories of species in need of conservation in

front of people's eyes would inspire the political will to take the steps necessary to protect them.

Remember when I started my career, almost nobody knew what a shark, whale, dolphin, or sea turtle looked like in its natural habitat.

Do you believe that approach has helped save animal species?

Certainly, it was very valuable in addressing the conservation challenges of the time. I have no question that enabling humans to bond with wild creatures by looking into their eyes on printed reproductions played an important part in reducing whaling and over-fishing, allowing populations to recover temporarily.

The most effect I had personally was probably by portraying sharks as wildlife going about their lives, rather than demons stalking humans,

I believe I played a part in building the movement against finning and revenge-killing. But now the threats are less direct and more insidious. Nearly every species on earth is threatened by climate change, habitat loss, and expanding human populations.

It's one thing to convince people to switch to dolphin-safe tuna, but quite another to convince them to limit their family size, stop flying on airplanes, downsize their



Doug Perrine free-dives to photograph an oceanic whitetip shark; photo by David Fleetham, Canon EOS 5D MKII, Canon 17-40mm lens @ 23mm, Ikelite housing, ISO 250, f6.6, 1/160 sec

automobiles, and cut way back on red meat.

As a rule, underwater photographers, who should be among the most aware of what's at stake, are among the highest emitters of climate pollution from air travel. As coral reefs are bleaching and dying around the world, divers just keep flying farther to find the last few that are still alive, with little acknowledgment that the flight to enjoy and document that beautiful surviving reef is helping to seal its doom.

How would you like to have people think about wild animals?

Nobody said it better than Henry Beston, in a quote that was once seemingly everywhere, but I don't see reproduced as often these days:

"We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion.

We patronize them for their incompleteness, for their tragic fate for having taken form so far below ourselves. And therein do we err. For the animal shall not be measured by man. In a world older and more complete than ours, they move finished and complete, gifted with the extension of the senses we have lost or never attained, living by voices we shall never hear. They are not brethren, they are not underlings: they are other nations, caught with ourselves in the net of life and time, fellow prisoners of the splendour and travail of the earth.”

You eventually settled in Hawaii and I presume the marine life played a big part in that decision?

I was a student at the University of Hawaii from 1970-1973, with the last two years at the Hilo campus on the Big Island. When I reached Hawaii Island I realized I had found the home that I had been missing my entire life. I left to travel the world in 1974, but the plan was always to come back. By 1997 I was bored with the “same-old, same-old” limited species set of the Caribbean – West Atlantic region, and fed up with Miami traffic and hurricanes. I mistakenly imagined that Hawaii would be the gateway to the Indo-Pacific and its extreme biodiversity. Only a couple of years after I moved back, the last direct

flights from Hawaii to the Western Pacific were canceled, and I was faced with having to fly to the U.S. west coast in order to turn around and fly over Hawaii to reach points westward. Nonetheless, I never regretted the decision to return to Hawaii. Los Angeles would have been a much better base for international travel, but not a suitable place for someone like me to live. In the age of covid I appreciate being here more than ever. What Hawaii lacks in species diversity and splashy colorful species it makes up for in unique species (world capital of endemism, and of endangered species) and ease of ocean access, not to mention being a really comfortable place to live, with incredible beauty above water.

Your desire to capture unique animal behaviour must have felt a wide remit. Were your early trips chosen with economic/logistical limitations or did you choose an animal and take it from there?

For dive magazine assignments, of course I followed the standard destination model – go to a particular locale and photograph whatever is there. But when I started organizing my own expeditions I put together what I believe were the first (for marine life, anyway) trips focused on a particular species. For some of my expeditions there was a focus on



(2015) – A lone, young, female humpback whale approached my boat off Kona, Hawaii, then dived under it. Hanging over the low gunnel of my boat, I could see that she was blowing a thin stream of silvery bubbles from her blowhole, while swimming around to create shimmering spiral curtains – all the while looking up at her work. There are no schooling fish to trap in these clear, empty waters, and there were no other whales in sight, so I concluded she was either amusing herself, indulging a creative urge, or just practicing her technique for future bubble-netting endeavors. Nikon D800E (36MP DSLR), Sigma 14mm lens, Nauticam housing with 9” dome port, ISO 800, f8, 1/320 sec

a particular behavior – such as the mass spawning of Nassau groupers. My trips then became the model for the Big Animals expeditions, the Silver Bank whale trips, etc. In the meantime

I quit offering trips to the public because of my inability to reconcile the other passengers’ expectations that I was there to serve them, and my stated formula that I was there

(2008) – While photographing marlins balling sardines off the tip of Mexico’s Baja Peninsula, we occasionally had a Bryde’s whale blast through and engulf most of the baitball. This picture captures the moment when the whale’s throat pleats were fully expanded with water and fish, just before it began to push the water back out through its baleen. This photo was Highly Commended in the 2009 WPOTY competition. Canon EOS 40D (10MP DSLR), Tokina 10-17mm lens @ 14mm, Subal housing with dome port, ambient light; ISO 200, f5.6, 1/800 sec



for my own photography and was sharing equally in the costs, in spite of also doing all the work of researching and organizing the trip, as well as assuming the financial risk of a failure to fill all the spots. A lot of my travel has been project-driven. After signing a contract to produce a book on sea turtles, I spent two years traveling the world in an attempt to document every life stage of every species of sea turtle.

Seapics, the stock agency for your and eventually others' images must have been quite rare in those days. In today's social media world it is easy to publicise but, back then, how did you 'spread the word'?

Before the internet, there were libraries and newsstands. I was able

to start getting my pictures published back when I had only a handful of publishable pictures because of my scientific background and writing ability. Publishers are rarely interested in receiving submissions of photos, no matter how good, as they have no immediate use for them. They are looking for stories. My familiarity with

current research in marine biology enabled me to shoot relevant photos and submit words-and-photos packages to magazine publishers. Having those appear in print then put them before the eyes of photo editors who might already have stories but needed supporting images. When a book publishing convention was

fortuitously scheduled for Miami, I took the opportunity to put together a proposal for a coffee table book, which I pitched at the convention. Nobody bit on that one, but one of the publishers made an offer to put together a book on sharks. Once that book was published I became one of the go-to photographers for pictures

of sharks. SeaPics grew out of the International Shark Photo File, which I created as a one-stop shop for shark images. Remember, in those days photo researchers couldn't go online, search for the images they wanted, and download for use. Slides had to be sent by post, and later by expensive couriers such as FedEx, and there was always a chance of delay, loss, or damage. The fewer different entities a researcher had to deal with, the easier their life became. With a wide range of images from many of the leading shark photographers of the time, I could supply an entire book about sharks with one shipment of slides.

The image stock business must be a far cry from its heyday but the digital world makes image distribution so much quicker, safer and therefore much cheaper to supply images. In addition there are more media outlets than ever before so is it still a worthwhile business model? Please feel free to have a 'pop' at free magazines etc etc :-)

Hardly. Photo use payments are continuing to decline, and there are ever more amateur photographers posting their images online and happy to have them used for free. Image stock agencies are continuing to fail, while a few are hanging on by continually streamlining, cutting costs and reducing photographers' fees.

You have been successful in competitions in the past. Were they an incentive?

Winning a competition always gives you a boost, but I've entered fewer competitions in my life than some younger photographers enter in a year. None really had a big impact on my career. For me the competition was always to get paid for having an image published.



(2021) – False killer whales are large, highly social dolphins that are Critically Endangered in Hawaii. They rush through the ocean at high speed while seeking prey, but when they make a kill, they summon the other members of the pod to share the catch.

I was able to free-dive down to photograph these family members sharing a large yellowfin tuna. Sony a7r3 (42MP mirrorless digital camera) with Sony 20mm lens in Nauticam housing with dome port, ambient light, ISO 800, f6.3, 1/640sec., ambient light

Did winning the Wildlife Photographer of the Year in 2004 with your iconic bronze whalers in sardines image change your career in the way that an Oscar might to an actor/actress, either opportunistically or financially?

Not on an Oscar level, no, but certainly had more impact than any other competition.

WPOTY at that time was on a three-year sponsorship cycle, and the third year, when I won, there was no prize money. Furthermore someone in the office apparently made a mistake and sent a full-resolution image file out with the press announcement, instead of the low-res, which probably resulted in a lot of unpaid uses.

I did get just a few high-profile and well-paid uses out of that, but remember the photo licensing business had already started its downslide at least five years earlier.

Actually, the NHM itself has given me a large share of the business that came from that win, as they have continued to publish books and other products featuring winners from past years.



(2003) – On my third year of chartering a private boat for the then little-known Sardine Run off the Wild Coast of South Africa, I finally got the baitball I wanted. I waited for cinematographer Peter Lamberti to run through his battery so I could be alone with the wildlife.

The baitball of sardines was surrounded by a couple of hundred sharks, that I could see. My microlight spotter pilot later told me he could see thousands more streaming in from all directions.

A strict dominance hierarchy ensured that the largest sharks (duskies and bronze whalers) fed

on the baitball (along with tuna and diving gannets), while the smaller blacktips and other sharks circled on the periphery, hoping for scraps and hassling the photographer.

I tried to position myself on the opposite side of the baitball from the attacking sharks. When I saw sudden movement I would start shooting blindly toward the fish, hoping to capture a shark bursting through, as eventually happened.

Because of the blinding fast speed of the action, I used a housed Canon strobe with high speed

sync, rather than an underwater strobe, so I could shoot at a higher shutter speed.

This photo was the grand prize winner in the 2004 WPOTY competition, while another of my shots of a shark circling the baitball took the Marine Life category in the same competition.

Canon EOS D60 (6MP DSLR) with Sigma 14mm lens, in UK Germany housing, with dome port, Canon 550EX strobe in UK Germany housing, ISO 200, f5.6, 1/800 sec (grayscale conversion by Stephen Frink)



(2014) – This is an example of the images I create to sell as large prints at art galleries in Kona, Hawaii, where I live. It's a composite of two Hawaiian green sea turtles basking on the beach (a uniquely Hawaiian phenomenon), and a photo taken from the exact same vantage point a few weeks later of a sunset at the same beach. Nikon D800E (36MP DSLR), with Nikon 20mm lens, light painting with flashlight, ISO 800, f14, 25 sec. (turtles)

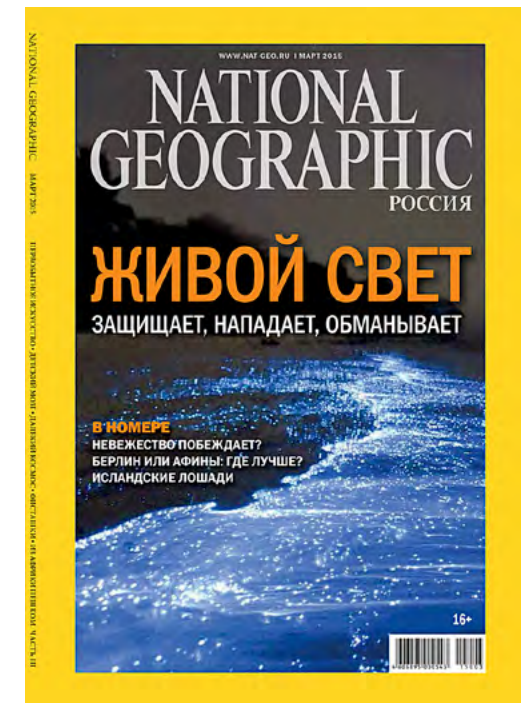
As originally a film shooter and a marine animal behaviour specialist, and with the advent of digital imaging, do you feel you have experienced the best of times?

Not in the sense of great photo opportunities. New technologies and discoveries continue to produce possibilities for images that surpass

what came before. For example just look at the amazing imagery of mesopelagic life that has been created since blackwater diving spread around the world. Low-light camera sensors and camera traps have enabled previously impossible shots of nocturnal and evasive animals.



(2010) – While traversing the waters of the far northern Baa Atoll in the Maldives on a liveaboard, we stopped at an uninhabited island for a dinner picnic on the beach. As the sky darkened, the wavelets lapping on the beach lit up with the bioluminescence of thousands of tiny ostracods in a breeding aggregation. Cruise Director Berkeley White was kind enough to shuttle me back to our ship to get my camera, which I propped on a jacket on a plastic chair for lack of a tripod to capture this time exposure. Nikon D700 (12MP DSLR), Nikkor 17-35mm lens @17mm, ambient light, ISO 3200, f4.5, 30 sec



On the other hand I do believe that I have experienced the best of times in the sense that I came into the world while there were still significant amounts of wildlife and wild spaces.

During my life cheap air travel, and the spread of dive businesses around the world provided access to wildlife internationally on a scale never before possible. Now wild areas and wildlife populations are shrinking everywhere, the sixth great extinction is underway, the climate crisis is making everything less predictable while wreaking havoc with habitats, and no responsible person can justify the greenhouse gas emissions of frequent air travel just to take pictures, even if picture sales could pay for it, which they no longer can.

In my generation, an average middle-class resident of any developed country lives better than the European royalty of previous centuries, but at a cost of significant and unsustainable depletion of the earth's resources and pollution of the biosphere. The generation just behind mine was the first in American history to not expect a standard of living higher than its parents' generation, and we can expect that trend to continue.

Did you see the advantages of digital cameras for underwater imaging and were you an early adopter? I've read that you knew Jim Watt who certainly was.

Jim Watt was a close friend and neighbor. He could not resist any shiny new gadget, and was an irrepressible evangelist for whatever had caught his fancy. He jumped in with the Canon D30, Canon's first prosumer DSLR, with a whopping 3 megapixels. I was not convinced. When he pounced on the next model, the 6MP Canon D60, he did win me over, and I never looked back. It was the D60 I used to shoot that winning photo in the NHM WPOTY



(2008) I was assigned by Scuba Times Magazine to photograph Bud Turpin, a Hawaii contractor whose hobby was creating temporary underwater sculptures out of erupting lava. The assignment led to many hair-raising experiences, and a friendship that continues to this day. Bud and I have both come to the realization that diving on an eruption is way too dangerous to justify (and is now illegal, as well). I just did a

Google Image Search to see if mine are still the only underwater pictures of erupting lava available, and discovered that AI generated images are now available for free download (at no risk whatsoever). Canon EOS 20D (8MP DSLR), Tokina 10-17mm lens, Subal housing with dome port, twin Inon Z220 strobes, ISO 400, f6.3, 1/60 sec