

Beneath Irish Seas

The journey to publishing a book of my underwater photography

By Nigel Motyer

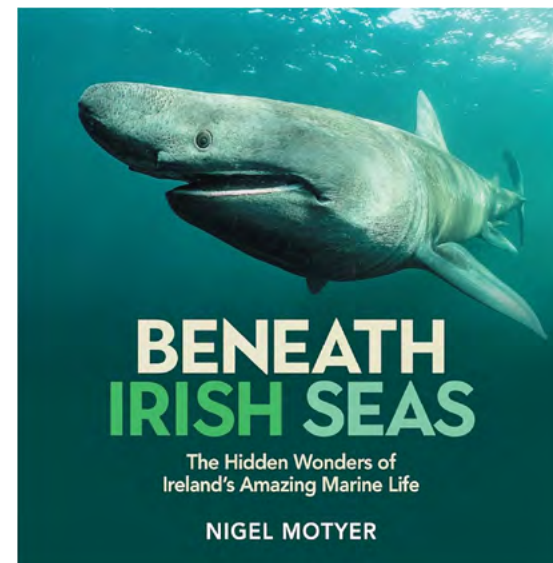
They say everybody has one good book in them, I kept mine hidden for a long time; even I couldn't see it. It was only one day when I opened Lightroom and it gave me a message that said my catalogue was too big to export that I began to wonder, a bit of a nag in the back of my mind, why do I take so many pictures, and what am I going to do with them?

Like most photographers, I had thought about producing a book over the years but I couldn't quite see beyond the idea that it was just a part of me that wanted to see my pictures in a published collection, I didn't see the story, I couldn't hear the message, in short, I couldn't ever quite see the point.

So roll forward a few years and I was doing a story on basking shark aggregations off the west coast of Ireland and the journalist I was working with was looking at some images I had on my laptop. She couldn't quite believe that Ireland's marine world was so colourful. That's a reaction I

A reef wall showing the stunning colours and biodiversity of a west coast Reef. Valentia Island Co Kerry, Ireland. Nikon Z8, 8-15mm lens Nauticam housing, 2 x Kraken KS160 strobes. 1/50th@F7.1 Iso 1000

A Blue Shark shadowed by a curious Common Dolphin. Offshore, west of from the Aran Islands. Nikon D750, 16-35mm lens, Nauticam housing. 1/125th @ f9 ISO 1600





A split shot of a curious Grey seal approaching the camera. Dalkey Island, Dublin Bay, Ireland. Nikon D850, 16-35mm lens, Nauticam housing. 1/400th @ F10 ISO 500

get a lot but she suggested I should consider doing a book. Knowing that she had authored a number of books herself, I asked her, if I did want to do that, how would I go about it? She said if I was interested, she'd make an introduction to her literary agent and I could talk to him.

I remembered a conversation I'd had with a good friend of mine who works in our national broadcaster. He was asking about my photography and was wondering what it was about underwater photography that had me so hooked? I told him that

it was the actual challenge of taking a creative image underwater that I loved more than the showing of them afterwards. He told me, that as a commissioning editor, he has found that the really creative work comes when the creator approaches it from an audience perspective, he went further, he thought that you can't be really creative if you are not thinking about an audience's perspective. By now the idea of a book was becoming a little more real to me and I started to really think about what a book would look like and how I would present the



A Crayfish sit just below the Kelp line at Black Rock, Co Mayo, Ireland. Nikon Z8, 8-15mm lens Nauticam housing, 2 x Kraken KS160 strobes. 1/60th @ f6.3 ISO 200

concept to somebody who had never been underwater before. In short, I started to think about the audience.

The idea was really still just a desktop exercise but, one day when I sat down to try to figure out what I was going to do with this oversized Lightroom catalogue and not being overly techy, it was starting to look like a painful job so, like when starting all hard jobs, doing something else looked like much a better idea and I started to go through the images and see what was really worth keeping. This time though, I was

trying to look at the images with a different perspective, I was trying to find pictures that others would find interesting. I didn't really know it but I was trying to find my audience's eyes, pictures that told those who'd never dived, my story, the story of what it was to be beneath Irish seas. The place I'd spent a good portion of the previous forty years.

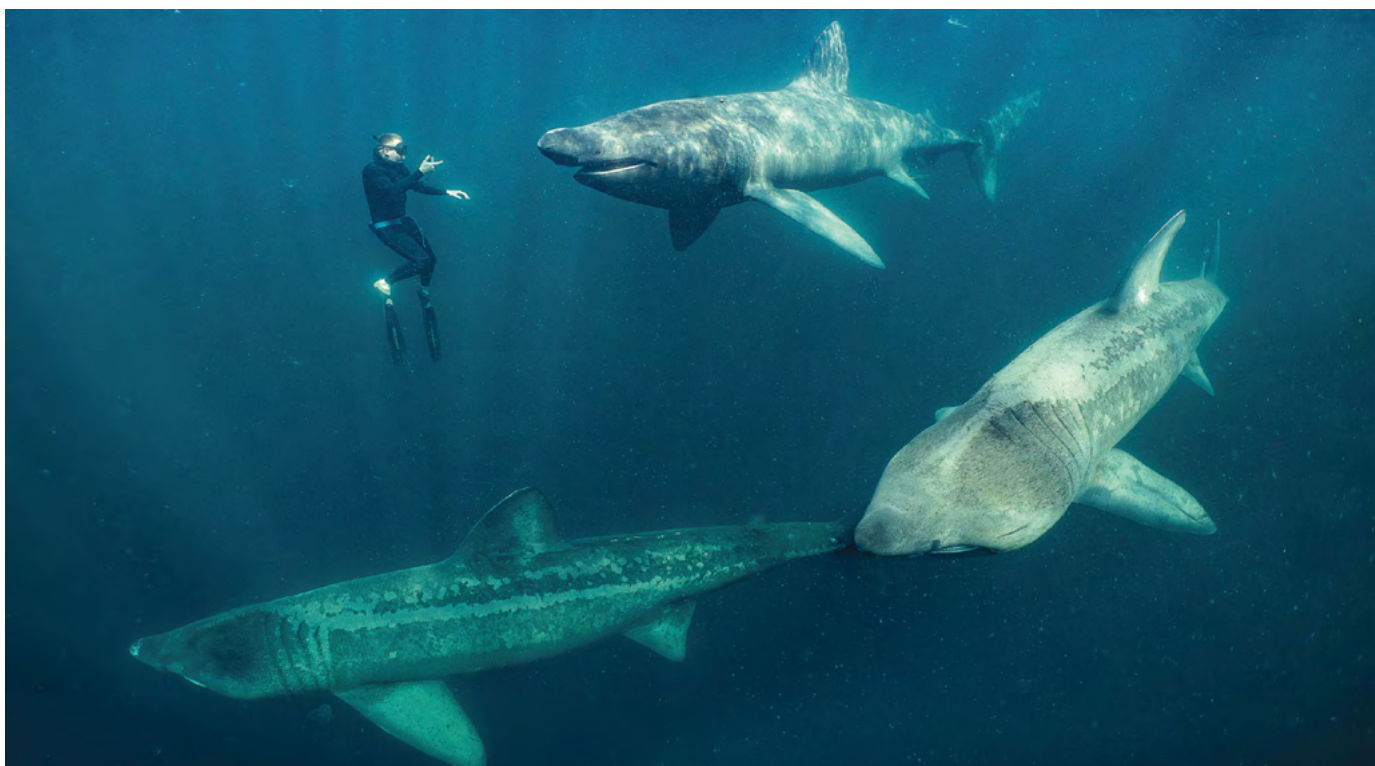
I started to think about a presentation, in my head I think it was more a power point presentation at that stage, but that allowed me select images I hadn't looked at in years and

build a fresh story. Images that would tell a tale or reveal the colour and diversity of the underwater world around our coast. Once I'd selected a portfolio of about 100 images, I decided to see how I would present them in a book format to showcase Ireland's coastline in a way that in the first instance, would surprise and hopefully draw in a non-diver.

I downloaded the software for an online photobook service and set about laying out the images. Almost without knowing it, I had moved from the challenge to myself to make images I rated, to images that told a story that built a narrative or moved a unobvious point along. It was totally different perspective and it really surprised me how much this changed my view of my own images. Pictures I had previously liked became less impressive; images I had forgotten came back into my head and I was constantly searching through the collection to find an image to illustrate something to an invisible audience largely in my head. It was absolutely true that having an audience in my mind made me much more demanding of myself.

The process of making my online book was really enjoyable but knowing when it was finished was tricky. In truth I could probably still be stuck on that phase now but something my son told me stuck in my head. He was going for a job and had just come back from his first proper challenging corporate interview and was relaying the questions he'd been asked and he told me an impressive line he'd thrown into one of his answers. "Progress beats perfection every day of the week". With that in my head and expectations high, I hit submit and waited for the book to arrive.

When I did though, I was pretty disappointed with the reproduction, it fell way short of the quality I had in my head, all I could see was the colour



Its only when you see a diver beside an full adult basking shark that you can appreciate the size of them. Adult Basking sharks can grow up to 12 meters long. Nikon Z8, 8-15mm lens Nauticam housing. 1/125th @ f9 ISO 1600

shifts, the greens were wrong and the blues lacked contrast. Print settings set for mass production of holiday snaps couldn't handle the subtlety I had seen on my Mac screen. However when I showed the book to folks around me, they largely didn't see the issues I saw, so in the spirit of "Progress over perfection" I decided to call that literary agent and set up a meeting.

A couple of weeks later I'm sitting across the table from him, pitching the idea of a book showing Ireland underwater. Ten minutes into the conversation I could tell that he was setting me up for a gentle decline to take on my project. The idea of Beneath Irish Seas wasn't grabbing him, I

could feel him slipping away. In fairness he was a serious player in the literary world representing some of the very best journalists around, global names with incredible life stories, famous memoirs and important stories that had to be told, my pitch wasn't landing, not until that is, I took out the book I had made up. He sat up, flicked through it, then again, this time more slowly, he looked me in the eye and said that he only agreed to take the meeting as a favour to the journalist who introduced us, he said he was getting ready to let me down gently, until that is, he saw the book. This surprised him and he really didn't know it was like this around our coast, was this really all taken in Ireland? Exactly the



*A Hydrozoa jellyfish. Nikon d850, 105mm lens
Nauticam housing, 2 x Kraken KS160 strobes. 1/150th
@F22 ISO 500*

reaction I wanted. He asked could he keep the book for a few weeks to show it to some people and he'd get back to me.

The following week I got on a plane and went to Indonesia for a month of diving around Raja Ampat and Triton Bay. While there I got an email to say that five publishers had now expressed interest



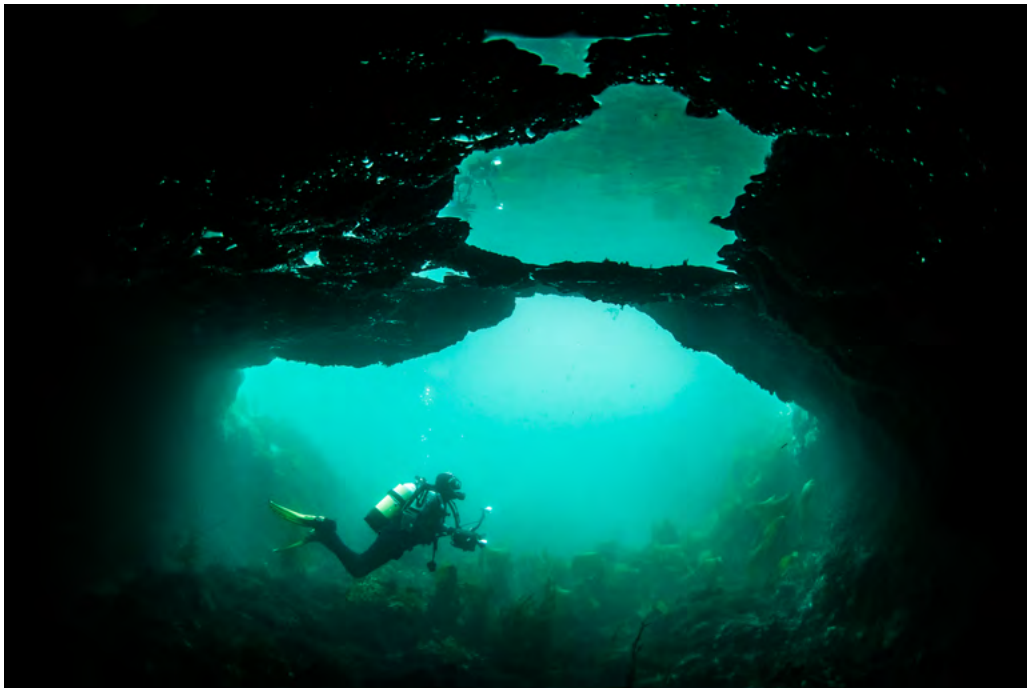
*Split shot of a diver just below the surface at Hook Head Co Wexford. Nikon Z8, 8-15mm lens, Nauticam housing.
1/250th @f22 ISO 500*

the book! By the time I landed back in Dublin we had two meetings set up and within a week a contract signed with Merrion Press and a deadline for a finished book in only 10 weeks' time! I went from my first introduction into the publishing world straight into a contractual publishing deadline and a race to finish the book in a matter of weeks.

I learned that the production of a book like mine worked on a timeline running back from the Christmas market. The book had to be ready for the wholesalers book buyers in July/August, they would

assess the market suitability and dictate the volume of projected sales and help define the price point. This in turn would help dictate the size of the book and the print run. So time really was of the essence.

The project was now moving out of my hands into a collaborative process with the publisher putting huge time pressure on me and the publishing team now gathering around me. I had to finish the image selection with the designer and write all the text and captions. They had to fact check it, design and focus group a cover wrap



A diver swims past the mouth of a cave in Hook Head, A limestone area in the southeast filled with caves and gullies providing great shore diving, Co Wexford, Ireland. Nikon D750, 16mm fisheye, Nauticam housing. 1/80 @ F3.2 ISO 400

design, lay it all out, taking into account multiple opinions, and proof it in only 10 weeks. Incredibly we did all of that and off the book went to the printers in Dubai. Then nothing. it suddenly felt awfully quiet after all that activity.

One day, while the book was away being printed, I woke up with the sudden realisation that I had never checked the name of the book to make sure it wasn't used by somebody else. Of course the publisher had done that already but I didn't know that and I grabbed

my phone and googled it and to my surprise my book was the first five or six returns. It was even available for pre-order. All of sudden it was real and publication was imminent.

I'm typing this the week before the book launch, I only saw an actual hard copy of the book myself a few days ago. Sometimes I do get the jitters about it coming out, this is something I've spent a good portion of my life building and now it's days away from being out there to be judged and criticised. You get one shot at a first book, that's a little



A Male Cuckoo Wrasse swims through Kelp in Donegal, in the North of Ireland. Nikon D750, 16-35mm lens, 2 x Inon z330 strobes Nauticam housing. 1/60th @ f6.3 ISO 200

nerve wracking. I hope people enjoy it but you never know. The publisher had asked me who I'd like to invite to review the book and despite the nervousness about what they'd say, I thought of the underwater photographers I most admire, in for a penny I thought, they can only say no, so let's just ask them.

We didn't have an actual book to show them but Brian Skerry and Alex Mustard both generously agreed to review a PDF version of the book. Having those two guys review the book made me even more nervous,

but they were both so kind, generous and encouraging with what they said.

I had worked with Brian on a National Geographic story on Ireland's marine world way back in 2003 and 2004 and I'd met Alex a few times and we've frequently visited the same places and even shouted hello's from one boat to another on occasion but we'd never actually travelled or dived together.

Their kind words came at a time when we'd just spent an intense 10 weeks pouring over and debating every minute detail of every image in



A typical west of Ireland reef scene, a diver over a Crayfish on a yellow boring sponge. Panasonic Lumix GH5, 14-42 Panasonic lens with Nauticam WWL B supplementary lens in a Nauticam Housing. 2 x Keldan 15K lumens video lights. 1/60th @6.3 ISO400 I spent a summer shooting images with constant light rather than strobes. It was an interesting challenge. 1/60th @6.3 ISO400

the book and I needed some positive affirmation about the finished article so I am hugely grateful to them both for giving their time and their support of the book in the way they did.

The funny thing was that in this period, after the book was signed off and gone for printing, I was still diving and taking pictures. All through the summer I was still shooting but I

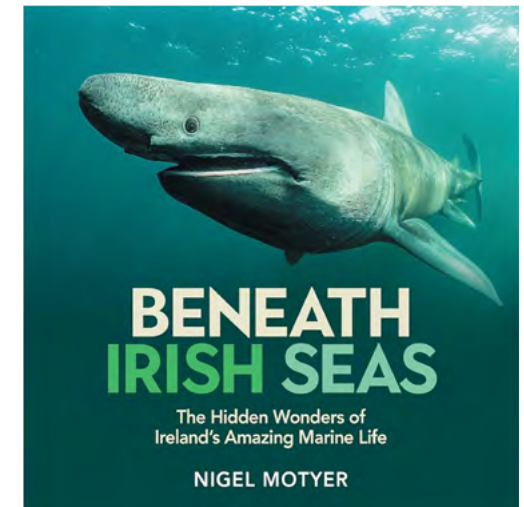
noticed that the way I shoot images has now distinctly changed. I'm much more selective on what I shoot and my post dive edit is much more brutal.

Fans of the Seinfeld sitcom will remember Elaine asking the question was an individual "sponge worthy". I am now asking is an image "catalogue worthy"

The process of selecting images



A Butterfly Blenny hides in Killary Fjord, Connemara, Co Galway. Taken with Nikon D750, 105mm macro lens, 2 x Inon z330 strobes, Nauticam housing. 1/15th @f13 ISO100



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from my back catalogue has made me much more picky on what now goes into the catalogue. I spend more time getting the lighting right, looking at the composition, things I was vaguely paying attention to now become much more front of mind before I trip the shutter.

I think I'm becoming a better photographer, and it only took 40 years!

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