

Making Pictures versus taking them (Part 2)

by Amos Nachoum

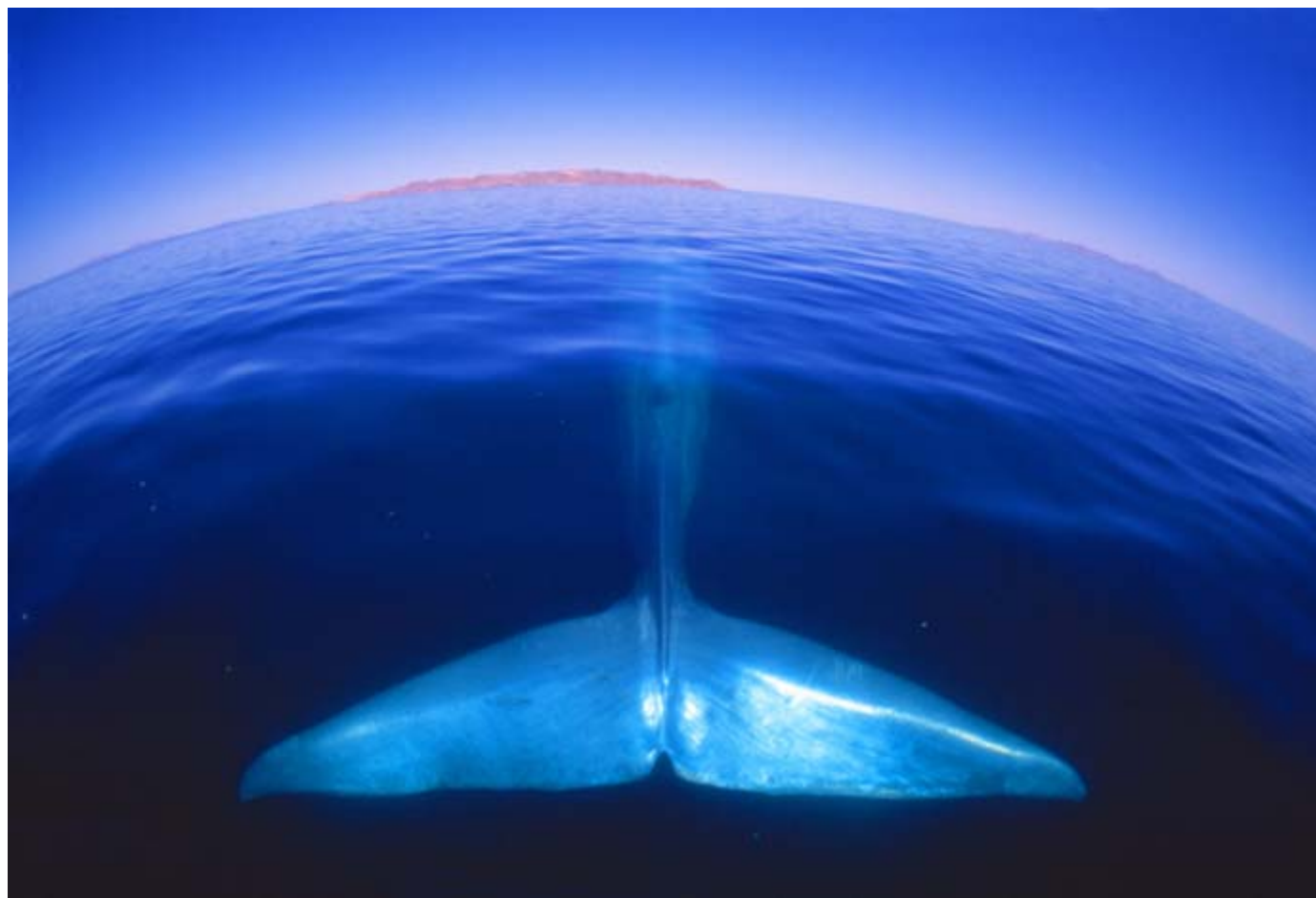
Blue Whale tail, Sea Of Cortez, Mexico.

Nikon F4. 16mm lens. 1/250, f-16. Fuji, Velvia 50ASA

In the annals of Big Animals there has never been one larger than the Blue Whale, Dinosaurs included. Flip Nicklin produced one of the best and most powerful images of a these creatures when he caught a rare image in the Sea of Cortez of a Blue Whale's head and half its body gliding on the surface in the late pink evening light, with the rugged mountains in the background. Just breathtaking.

This image burned into my mind's eye like few others and drove me to pursue Blue Whales in Baja and the chance to create my own photo opportunities.

It was the third week of four I had budgeted for the Blue Whale shoot and I was experiencing limited luck. It was another hot and dead calm day in Baja. It was midday and I was overheating in my wetsuit, sitting ready to get into the cool water if and when the opportunity arose. We waited, but no whales came. We were dead in the water, engine off, Loreto and Eran (my guides) listening to ocean clues and I was slipping in and out of the catnaps that I am infamous for when Loreto whispered, "Belina Azule". I woke up and looked around



excitedly, but saw nothing, so looked to Loreto and with my eyes asked him "Where"?

Loreto started the panga and I scrambled for my camera bag. Out of the blue and as if in a dream, there it was - the giant tail of a Blue whale. It was directly in front of the panga that Loreto was maneuvering so skillfully.

The tail was fanning ten feet on each side of the bow where I was bracing myself. The rest of the gargantuan body, some 80 feet long, was disappearing just inches below the surface of the blue water ahead of us.

My hands and knees were trembling. I whispered urgently to Loreto in my broken Spanish, "Mas cerca" ("Get closer"), as Flip Nicklin's image surfaced in my mind. I turned to my camera bag and pulled out a Nikon F4 and the 16mm fish eye lens from among the many lenses. As I composed the image, I realized there had been divine intervention here. Looking through the super-wide angle lens, I brought into focus the giant whale's tail and the island in the distant background. And I prayed (one of the few times ever) that I had captured the image I had seen in my mind's eye for so long.



“Renaissance” Humpback whale, mother & calf Kingdom of Tonga

Nikonos III, 15mm 1/60 f-5.6
Kodachrome 64 ASA

I noticed (during 1991) that images of Humpback Whales were mostly taken horizontally. None or very few had been shot vertically. I hoped I would have an opportunity for such a vertical shot. For seven years I came up empty-handed, but I held fast to my vision.

It was during a six-day project in the Kingdom of Tonga in '97 that it happened. It was late morning when we came upon a female and her young calf about two weeks old. We were three free divers on board the boat. Jim Watt, a well-known whale photographer from Hawaii. Paul Sutherland a good action photographer from New Jersey and myself. We went into the water, Jim leading the pack as we slowly approached the mother and calf.

On a pre-agreed signal, we started our free dive together. Jim was upfront with Paul and me shoulder to shoulder behind him. When I leveled off at about 40 feet deep, the female Humpback was suspended almost vertically in the water, looking at us below her. Jim and Paul were just above me and closing the distance toward the motionless female

and her calf.

I raised my Nikonos III with the superb 15 mm lens. I viewed the action through the viewfinder and it was classic. This was the image I had held in my mind's eye for the last seven years - a Humpback whale with her calf vertically! I was so excited I spat the snorkel from my mouth, but I could not take the picture yet, because Jim and Paul were still in the frame. I was running out of air but had to wait for them to leave.

The desire to breath was excruciating, but realizing my dream image was more powerful. I kicked a few steps closer to the whales that were towering above me. The divers gone, I raised the camera again and triggered it once, but closed my eyes out of pain.

I open my eyes and was starting my ascent when the young calf left the far side of its mother and positioned itself on the opposite side, between her and the camera. I stopped ascending, despite the throbbing pain in my lungs, and took a second and third image (the only ones could muster), then moved out as fast as I could.

The power of having captured the vision I had lived with for so long inspired the creation of the poster, “Renaissance”. Five thousand of them sold within eight months and the image was also used for many editorial, education and advertising applications.

The Great White climbing on board...

There are many great images of the Great White with jaws open above the water. Two years ago, I traveled to South Africa to try and capture the same shot underwater and return unharmed. The image that had formed in my mind was of wide open shark jaws heading for my camera, so that I could see all the teeth and deep into this jaw cavity.

I was excited about capturing this vision with my new “pole cam”, but a few days into the assignment, it became clear the pole cam was not going to deliver the image I was after and that I would have to find a new approach. When I landed upon it and explained the idea to Andre, the shark wrangler I was working with, and his assistant, Rozier, they both laughed and said I was crazy. The idea was that Andre would pull the bait close to the boat, luring the shark close to the platform and then pull the bait on board. At this point I would hold the camera out in front of the shark in the hope that it would open its jaws to take the moving bait. A human pole cam!

We set out the next morning with my Nikon F4 and a 16mm Fish Eye lens in an Aquatica housing. I had rehearsed the action many times in my mind and was ready for action. Lying face down to the water with half my body overboard, my hands were extended into the water with the camera and housing. Aperture priority at f8, focus on infinity, I was determined that this setting would get me enough depth of field to cover the subject and that the 400ASA film at f8 would be fast enough to freeze the action.

Andre threw the bait and the shark started its



way toward the boat. Rozier was standing above me holding onto a belt around my waist that he would use to pull me out of the water if I could not withdraw in time. I extended my arms fully in order to get the camera as close as possible to the incoming shark. The bait that had been floating in front of my lens was pulled away and the shark came into my view.

I was holding the housing tightly, aiming and concentrating, anticipating releasing the shutter, but instead I felt a powerful force twisting the housing to the right and out of my hands. The shark had my

housing in its powerful extended jaws. Without thinking, I turned my body and hands to the opposite side of the shark's pull in the hope of levering the housing from the powerful grip of the massive jaws. At the same time Rozier was pulling the belt to keep me on board the boat.

At the split second the shark let go I took this image. It was just what I had wanted, but reflecting back on the experience, while the “human” pole cam turned out to be far better than a remote pole cam, I would think again before putting myself and my team mates in such jeopardy.



Walrus's last frame

Nikonos RS, 18mm lens. F16 on Auto

I had been free-diving under the ice after Bowhead whales around Igloodik in the Canadian High Arctic and surfaced to see my team looking in the direction of a giant Walrus basking in the arctic summer sun. She had removed herself from her family group to begin the process of dying.

She was a grand animal of about nine feet in length and stretched out on the ice, anchored by two enormous tusks that reflected the bright sunlight. As I looked on in admiration, a picture started to form in my mind's eye. Majestic in her isolation, the animal contrasted starkly with the pure white ice and the deep blue of the sky. It was unusual to see a solitary Walrus and with such sizeable tusks and I wanted this picture badly.

There was, however, at least 200 feet of three foot thick sheet ice between us. For a good picture, I would have to get extremely close, since the only lens I had with me after the dive was the Nikon RS 18mm with six frames left. I couldn't crawl toward the animal because she might scare and move away so I decided to take my chances and approach by water. This meant I would have to break the ice in order to advance, but none of us

had a diving knife, ice axe, or any other tool to break the ice with.

As the opportunity started feeling like it might slip away, I landed on a solution. I took the strobe tray from the base of the RS and starting using it to chisel my way through the ice toward the Walrus. Three hours later, it had been slow progress indeed, but I was where I needed to be for the shot - about one foot away just below the Walrus.

The foot long blond whiskers shimmied with each powerful (in more ways in than one) exhaling breath. With the sun behind me, illuminating the giant creature, I slowly immersed myself in the water again, extending the camera slowly above my head onto the ice, close to the Walrus tusk and took one image. As I cautiously moved the camera even closer, I knew that I had only a few more seconds before the Walrus would react to the intrusion. I raised the f stop to f-16, giving me more depth of field, to ensure I captured the full length of the ivory tusks. I managed to capture two more shots before the Walrus became uncomfortable at my presence. As the Walrus started, I moved the camera out of the way quickly and left her to her peace and solitude.

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