

Interview with Kim Westerskov

By Ross Armstrong

New Zealander Kim Westerskov is the only photographer to have received five first places in the prestigious BBC/British Gas Wildlife Photographer of the Year competition. I caught up with Kim at his home in Tauranga to talk about his photographic career.

What got you started in underwater photography?

I have always liked photography. My parents gave me a camera when I was about eight or ten. I learnt to dive as part of my PhD in marine biology at Otago University - studying oysters. It seemed an obvious thing to try underwater photography and it became an important tool in my research. The marine lab at Portobello had lots of dive gear - and also Nikonos cameras! This was fortunate because I couldn't afford any - so I borrowed theirs for a decade or more. I'm very grateful to them for this, and also to Bill Ballantine at the Leigh Marine Laboratory for employing me when I was thinking "What do I do next?"

In 1981 I graduated from Otago University and also had my first book published: 'The Seas Around New Zealand'. This book really helped get my career going. I took all the photos and wrote ten chapters. My friend Keith Probert (another marine biologist at Portobello) wrote the other 20 chapters.

In 1983 I married Vivienne



(Above) New Zealander Kim Westerskov

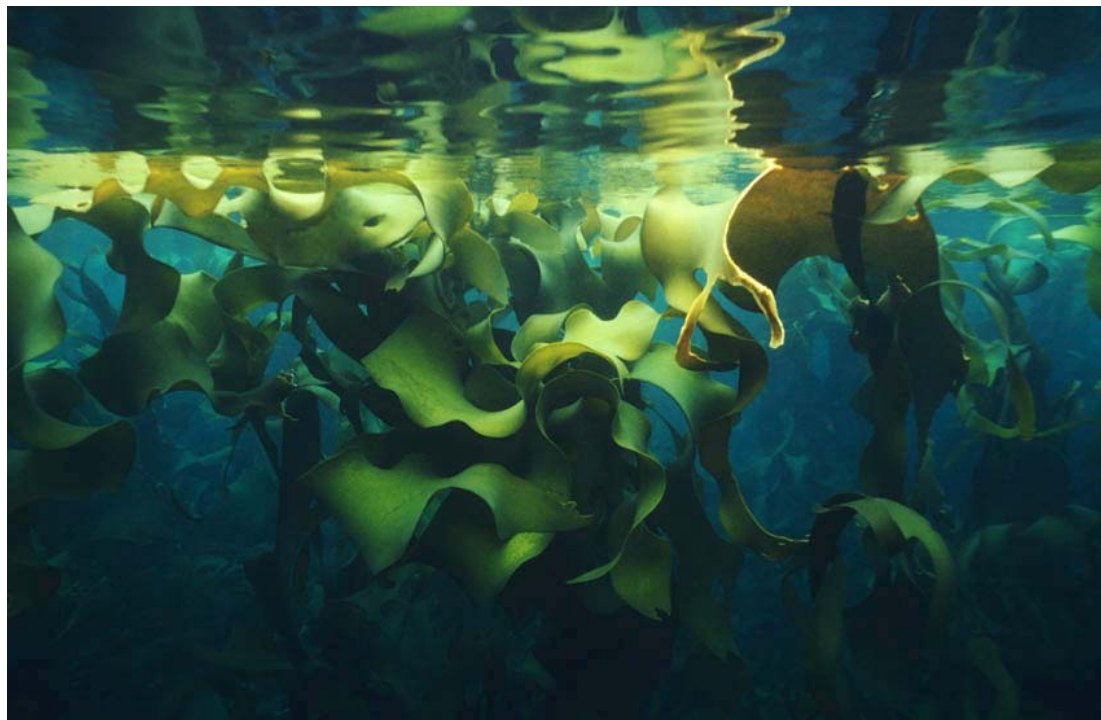
(Below) Young humpback whale about to surface in clear tropical waters, South Pacific. This youngster - a baby really at 5 metres length - later caught me with its long pectoral fin and carried me along for awhile. I call it being "cuddled" by a whale. Canon F-1, Canon 20mm lens, in Mark Twain housing with fisheye port. Ektachrome Elite (EB) 100.f4 or 5.6.



and the following year declared myself a full-time freelance photographer and writer. There was no money coming in at all to begin with, but I persevered, and

eventually it became 'a goer'. It's going really well these days.

*Dense underwater forest of bull kelp *Durvillaea antarctica*. Subantarctic Auckland Islands, New Zealand. Nikonos 5, Nikonos 15mm lens. Ektachrome Elite (EB) 100. f4 or 5.6, auto exposure.*



How did your underwater photography develop?

There was one clear decision that I made somewhere in my twenties. I had persevered with underwater photography to a point where I more or less knew what I was doing and was getting reasonable results. I was about to move on to 'the next thing' but thought "Isn't it time to stick with one thing long term and see where it leads me?" So I stuck with underwater photography. It was a good choice - it's been heaps of fun. Challenging but very rewarding.

I have always taken mostly above water photographs but have somehow built up an image of being an 'underwater photographer'. In an average year I would do between 30 and 50 dives. Never 100 - not yet anyway. So diving has never been a huge part of my life, but it has always been an important



Blue shark, South Pacific. Canon F-1, Canon 20mm lens, in Mark Twain housing with fisheye port. Ektachrome Elite 100. f4 or 5.6.

one. I have tried to make every dive count by either diving where no one else has dived before, or with a whale or, somewhere special. My results have come not from huge numbers of dives, but from getting the most out of each one.

What do you credit your photographic success to?

The reason for doing well in the past was partly because I got myself to places that no one else had been to before. Anywhere that hasn't got people sounds good to me - and if it's cold as well it sounds even better. My

patch is from Fiordland and Otago down through Stewart Island, the Sub-Antarctic islands and Antarctica itself. I would look at maps and wonder which of these islands I could maybe get to. Nowadays I'm having to rapidly upgrade my technical and creative abilities, as well as just getting to faraway places.

In 1991-92 I got a really big contract with Christchurch International Airport who were building a seven million-dollar Antarctic Visitor Centre and wanted a photographer in Antarctica to get photos. I had already spent four months there in 1981-82 and another 2-3 months in 1990, so I knew the system and what was involved. I knew how cameras reacted in the temperatures of -30 to -50 degrees (Celsius) below freezing. I took around 24,000 photos during that time in Antarctica, including underwater, aerial, and from an icebreaker.

Do you consider yourself a technical photographer or creative or what?

Definitely not technical. However, there is a certain amount of technical knowledge that you simply have to know - you can't just be an artist without understanding your tools. I have enough technical skills to get my pictures, and to figure out what the limitations of my equipment are, and work within them. Pete Atkinson and Darryl Torckler have been very generous in helping me with technical matters and I'm much indebted to them.

Maybe underwater photography is like a triangle: 'technical' in one corner,



Baby Southern Right Whale heading towards me. It passed within touching distance [I didn't touch it]. That big dark thing behind it is its mother. Winter breeding grounds, subantarctic Auckland Island. Nikonos 5, Nikonos 15mm lens. Ektachrome 100S. f4 or 5.6, auto exposure.



"Aroha". Bladder kelp Macrocystis pyrifera on shore. Limpets. Subantarctic Auckland Islands. Canon EOS-1. Canon 35-350mm lens. Ektachrome 100VS. Gitzo tripod.

'artistic' in the second corner and 'biology' in the third. The biology is not just scientific knowledge but more of a connection. I fit in easily with animals: I admire them, don't hassle them, don't get eaten by

them. Every photographer will fit into this triangle differently as we each have our particular strengths. I'm somewhere in the middle of the triangle, but near the biology corner.



Diving in Antarctica, alongside the overhanging ice wall of a floating glacier tongue. Erebus Glacier Tongue, Ross Island, Antarctica. Nikonos 5, Nikonos 15mm lens, Fujichrome RDP. f2.8, auto exposure.

do it? There is no magic formula I know of - apart from doing something that you like and believing in yourself. Some photos will work - 'connect' - and some won't. Learn from both kinds - and move on. Keep moving.

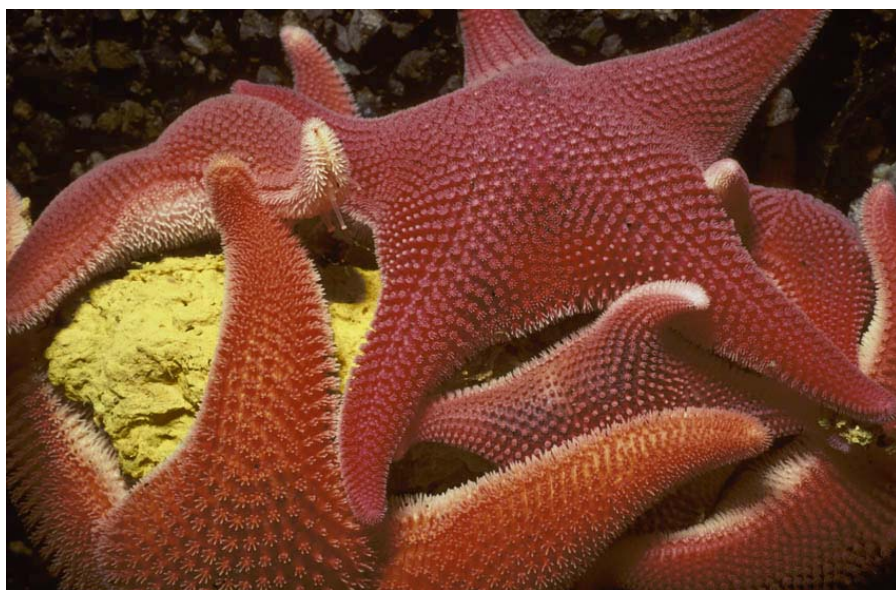
Wide angle photography has always appealed to me. Wide-angle photos are basically underwater landscapes. In them there is usually a foreground - you can see something clearly and have an appreciation of its colour, texture and personality. But there's also a sense of distance and some of that feeling which doesn't photograph easily - the experience of being underwater. That feeling or mood is what we are all striving to capture and wide angle seems to achieve this best.

What advice would you give to anyone thinking about trying underwater photography?

Do it. Enjoy it.

Sounds like great advice. We look forward to seeing many more great photos taken by you in the future.

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Group of red starfish (Odontaster validus) feeding. Under sea ice, shallow sea floor, Ross Island, Antarctica. Nikonos 5, 28mm lens, close up tube, Velvia, Sea and Sea YS-200 strobe. f22, 1/30

Do you think that there is much left to be done with underwater photography?

There's heaps still to do, and I'm working on some promising leads at present. It is only our lack of our imagination

and commitment that stops a lot more happening.

What makes a good photo?

Connecting with people. Sounds simple, but how do you