

Jacques-Yves Cousteau

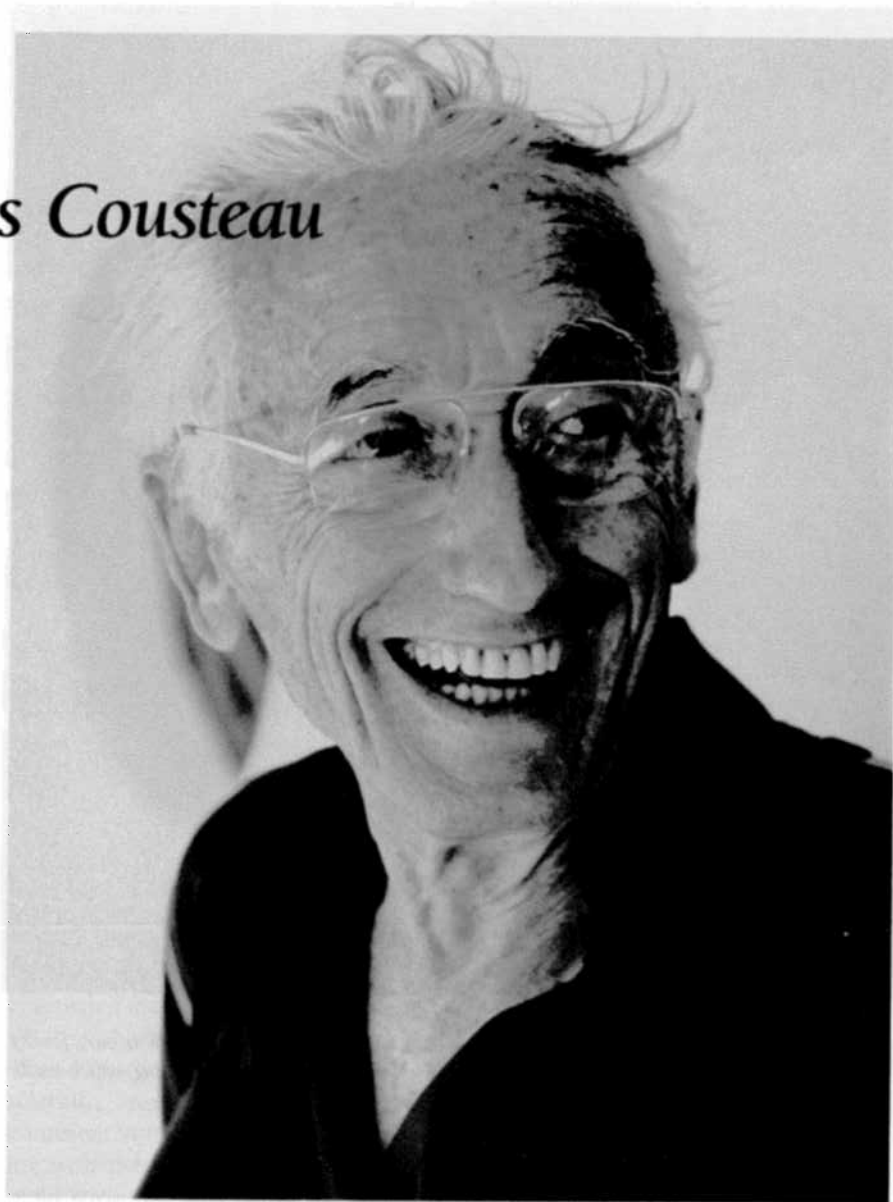
He made his first voyage for American television in the early 1950s. Since then, this self-described “impresario of science” has produced more than sixty films for television, a medium he has enriched not only with his legendary underwater explorations but with his conscience, artistry, and scholarship, as well as his passion for all things living.

Now, after a half century of probing the depths, Captain Jacques-Yves Cousteau has turned his sights toward his “most important expedition,” his farewell voyage for television. His mission: to examine some of the ecological disasters he believes signal the beginning of the end of life on earth.

The ambitious five-year, \$15-million *Rediscovery of the World* series will take him and his audience on another series of expeditions that circumnavigate the globe. In twenty one-hour specials underwritten by Ted Turner, Cousteau and his crews aboard the *Alcyone* and the *Calypso* will visit lands discovered centuries ago by such explorers as Christopher Columbus, Amerigo Vespucci, and Hernando Cortez.

“The series,” Cousteau says, “has little to do with the behavior of animals and everything to do with the behavior of people.”

In the first of the *Rediscovery* series—*Haiti: The Waters of Sorrow* (which



With his underwater television explorations, he unlocked the oceans' colorful treasures from the depths of obscurity to the eyes of the world above sea level.

made its debut in 1986 on Turner Broadcasting System's WTBS)—it became clear that Cousteau's focus had undergone a shift. Although he was still curious about underwater life and still fascinated by the beauty of the world around him, what emerged in *Haiti* was a sociological portrait of a nation that has plundered, perhaps irreversibly, all its land and water resources.

With the airing of that special, Cousteau warned us that human life is

an endangered species. The man who had begun his career as an oceanographer was now telling us we were murdering our home, the earth. A lifetime of study had made him an outraged environmentalist.

Cousteau's career in oceanography has been a fifty-year record of remarkable achievements. His interest in the marine world began in the summer of 1936, shortly after his career in aviation was abruptly ended by an automobile accident in the Vosges



Jacques-Yves Cousteau, second from right, goes diving with his wife and children in an early family photo. All four sport Cousteau's and Emile Gagnan's 1943 invention, the Aqualung, which made extended underwater diving possible.

Mountains. The twenty-six-year-old Cousteau, an officer in the French navy, suffered multiple injuries, including fractures and temporary paralysis in his right arm. After his return to active duty, he was transferred to Toulon, where a friend urged him to begin swimming as a means of strengthening his injured arm. He followed the advice.

Cavorting one day with friends on the beach in Toulon, he donned a pair of aviator's goggles, entered the water, and swam beneath the surface to a magical world he had never dreamed existed. By the time he emerged, the course of his life had been altered forever. "Sometimes we are lucky

enough to know that our lives have been changed," he would observe later. "It happened to me that summer's day when my eyes opened to the world beneath the surface of the sea."

During that extraordinary summer, he also brought his Beaulieu camera to the beach (photography was a favorite hobby) and constructed a waterproof container with a clothespin lever that allowed him to focus the lens. That camera represented the beginning of his fascination with marine photography.

He also began a series of diving experiments during the same summer, swimming deeper, remaining beneath the water's surface for longer periods,

and trying, by trial and error, to fashion a mechanical breathing device. His experiments eventually led him and Emile Gagnan to the 1943 invention of the Aqualung, which made it possible for human beings to enjoy extended underwater explorations.

Born in Saint-André-de-Cubzac in the Bordeaux region of France on June 11, 1910, Cousteau, the son of a financial adviser, grew up in Paris and New York, then in 1930 enrolled in the French Naval Academy. He married Simone Melchior in 1937. (She accompanied him on most of his voyages on the *Calypso*.) During World War II, he participated in the Resistance movement, organized an experimental diving unit in Toulon, made three film shorts, and perfected his Aqualung.

After peace returned to Europe, Cousteau continued making documentary shorts and began an extended search for a boat of his own. In 1950 he obtained the *Calypso*, a U.S.-made minesweeper he soon remodeled into a research vessel. At about the same time, he created Campagnes Océanographiques Françaises, a nonprofit research and-development association to support the voyages of the *Calypso*. Later that year, on November 27, *Life* magazine published seven pages of text and photographs on Cousteau as scuba diver/inventor/filmmaker. Someone at Universal Pictures saw the spread and offered him \$11,000 to distribute three of his film shorts as theatrical releases in the United States.

On November 24, 1951, the *Calypso* left Toulon on its first expedition: a trip to the Red Sea's coral reefs. The story of that expedition and the photographs resulting from it were snapped up by *National Geographic* after Cousteau visited the publication's headquarters in Washington, D.C. That article was the first of twelve he would publish in the magazine.

Shortly afterward, Cousteau's American television career was launched when he signed an agreement to do three films for *Omnibus*, a ninety-minute CBS magazine program established by a Ford Foundation grant and

narrated by Alistair Cooke. The first of those films, *Undersea Archaeology*, was telecast January 17, 1954.

Other voyages—and new honors—followed. In 1956 Cousteau's film *The Silent World* (codirected with the young Louis Malle) won an Oscar and the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Since then, he has won two other Oscars and ten Emmys. In 1957 Cousteau was appointed director of Monaco's venerable Oceanographic Institute by Prince Rainier.

Cousteau's television career, on hold since the *Omnibus* films, resumed in May 1966 with the airing of the

National Geographic-CBS special, *The World of Jacques Cousteau*, which explored "one of the first steps in man's economic occupation of the ocean floor," according to Cousteau. His experiments with human colonies under the sea, where people lived and worked for three weeks in depths between 350 and 420 feet, received worldwide attention.

In 1966 Cousteau also began to prepare for the series of specials that would become his greatest television triumph. Shortly after the telecast of the CBS program, Cousteau and David Wolper Productions signed a \$4.2-million contract with ABC to produce twelve one-hour films for television. The explorations were planned as filmed adventures, not documentaries (a word Cousteau dislikes).

The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau made its debut January 8, 1968, and remained on the air until April 14, 1977. Beautifully photographed, well conceived, and written with a poetic touch, the series set a standard that few TV explorations of nature ever reach.

For instance, one special, *South to Fire and Ice* (November 29, 1973), chronicled the triumph and the tragedy of the *Calypso's* voyage to Antarctica. That trip unearthed a wealth of new scientific knowledge about the frozen continent, including an ocean swarming with fish and luxuriant plant life happily growing beneath the icebergs—life four times richer in primary food sources than life that exists any other place on the planet.

But the voyage that had led Cousteau to such a pristine world also led to the death of the young naturalist Michel Laval, first mate of the *Calypso*, who was struck by the tail propeller of an incoming helicopter. During that voyage Cousteau and crew also witnessed the ramming of the 141-foot research vessel by an iceberg.

Cousteau poses in an early version of the modern wetsuit.



Cousteau (left), who spends most of his time in the water, occasionally needs a bird's eye view.

Other *Undersea World* specials weren't surrounded by such high drama, yet they too mesmerized viewers. In *The Sleeping Sharks of Yucatán* (April 6, 1975), Cousteau managed to create great suspense and excitement as he attempted to unravel the mystery of a strain of sharks found "sleeping" in caves off the coast of Yucatán.

The thirty-six specials of *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* became a monument to the excellence the medium is capable of achieving. In 1977, after the show was not renewed because it had, according to an ABC spokesman, "slipped below the [ratings] surface a bit," Cousteau employed his camera and boat on behalf of PBS, where he made twenty-one films for the *Oasis in Space* and the *Cousteau Odyssey* series. His work for PBS covered the five-year period between 1977 and 1982.



Cousteau's dedication to the preservation of the earth's resources is legendary. He is fighting to save the world's endangered species, including man.

When asked if the films from his series had become ends in themselves and if science might be taking a backseat to spectacular photography, Cousteau responded promptly:

"Oh, yes, the first consideration is the film. But science does not suffer. Without our films, there would be no science." Then, speaking of the Antarctic expedition, he added, "No scientific committee, no foundation, no institution, no matter how rich, could afford it. TV was the only way to finance it. We've been very lucky. Television gives us a continuity of financial support."

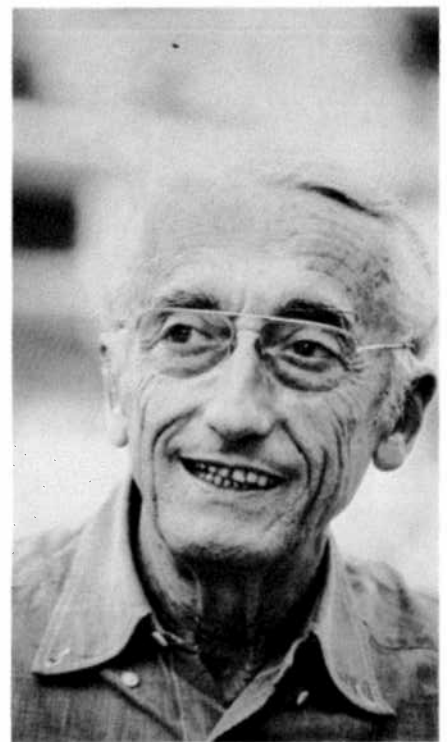
In 1981 Cousteau signed an exclusive contract with Turner Broadcasting System. His critically acclaimed *Cousteau/Amazon* series produced a quartet of films for TBS in 1985-86. He has already made another quartet for the TBS *Rediscovery of the World* series. Each of the shows for that series, incidentally, has been budgeted at \$750,000.

By the time he completes the *Rediscovery* voyages, Cousteau, seventy-seven, a man who seems to have unlimited reserves of energy, will be eighty years old. His project, which focuses on the rapport between hu-

mans and the waters around them, represents yet another attempt on the part of Cousteau to bring man to a better understanding of himself and his world.

"Instead of just being ecologists, we are becoming sociologists," he said at a recent meeting of the Anglo-American Press Association in Paris. "The quality of the water [determines] in large measure the quality of life."

—J.S.



Cousteau's latest project is the ambitious five-year series, Rediscovery of the World, underwritten by Ted Turner.