

By Sophie Hurcom

# A Legend of the Sea

**T**his summer marks the end of the centennial celebrations of legendary marine explorer Jacques Cousteau, the French voyager who introduced the world to the treasures of the deep. His work as a filmmaker, environmental activist, underwater explorer and inventor educated people about a world previously unknown to them.

Since his death in 1997, the Cousteau Society, an organisation Jacques founded in 1973 to protect ocean life, has worked hard to maintain Cousteau's legacy. Under the leadership of President Francine Cousteau, Jacques' wife, the society is commemorating Cousteau's life through festivities all year, spectacularly rounded off with the re-launch of *Calyпсо*, the ship that he famously undertook his adventures aboard.

Born in 1910, Jacques-Yves Cousteau's early life did not immediately point towards an adventurous career. As a child he was sickly, eventually being told by doctors not to participate in strenuous

activity. However even then, his determination was visible, defying doctor's orders he learned to swim and his love for the water began.

Some may say his career with the ocean was more of a lucky coincidence, not part of a conscious plan. After graduating from the French Naval Academy, Cousteau began aviation training, yet a serious car accident ended his potential career as a pilot. Although originally devastated, this marked an experience that would change his life. In 1936, during rehabilitation from his accident, Cousteau got his first glimpse of the wonders under the sea, after being given a pair of underwater goggles used by divers. Immediately he started designing a device that would allow humans to breathe underwater.

## Aqua-Lung

The outbreak of World War II temporarily put this new desire on hold, yet even during wartime, Cousteau's heart was not far from the sea. In 1943 Cousteau together with engineer Emile Gagnan developed the Aqua-Lung, the world's first self-contained underwater breathing apparatus. Suddenly, humans were able to fully experience life under the sea like never before, exploring the ocean

**‘The impossible missions are the only ones which succeed.’**

JACQUES COUSTEAU

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► Jacques Cousteau on the *Calypso* during a voyage through Antarctica. Photo by c.United/Everett/Rex Features.



depths for prolonged periods.

Despite this great invention, Cousteau still managed to find the time to serve his country. Unbeknown to many he was even awarded the Legion d'Honneur, the highest decoration in France, for working at the heart of the French resistance during World War II as a saboteur and spy, adding war hero to his list of career accolades.

After the war, Jacques' most precious partner and sidekick was discovered, the *Calypso*, in 1950. What became the famous research ship started life as a mine-sweeper, removing mines left over from war from the bottom of the ocean. She was converted into an oceanographic vessel complete with instruments for diving and scientific research, and the great adventure alongside Cousteau began.

Their first research voyage together to the Red Sea was a great success. Multiple expeditions advanced knowledge of the deep sea by gathering underwater flora and fauna and extensively photographing the seabed. As the Cousteau Society themselves state, the voyages remarkable findings taught Cousteau there was only one way to understand the sea, 'Go see for ourselves'.

## Oscar

By the early 1950's Jacques profile was on the rise and it was only a matter of time before his work reached the wider public. Having documented his research through endless photos and film reels, Jacques used it to produce his first film in 1956, *The Silent World*. The film was an instant success, screened around the world receiving international recognition. As well as winning the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival, the movie even landing him the award every filmmaker dreams of, an Oscar (for Best Foreign Film).

Yet it is his television series that are commonly remembered by the mass public, (alongside his legendary red cap). The first series, *The World of Jacques-Yves Cousteau* aired in 1966 introducing millions to the wonders and creatures under the sea, the kind they had never seen before. Praised by critics and achieving high ratings Cousteau was commissioned for a follow-up series, *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau*, in 1968. The show eventually ran for eight series and became a bit of a family affair, with two of Jacques' sons, Phillippe and Jean-Michel also starring. Even today the series still continues to fascinate generations.

Son Pierre-Yves Cousteau has said his father's philosophy was very much, 'People protect what they love – and we love what enchants us', and this ethos of protection was at the root of Jacques work. Undoubtedly, some of his greatest achievements include his campaigning to preserve ocean life, enlightening the public and exposing the irreversible effects of environmental destruction. Famously labelled by Jacques, 'Vandalism of the oceans', he set about to pre-



▲ The Aqua-Lung opened up the treasures of the deep.

serve sea life and prevent mans damaging effect on the sea.

In 1960 Cousteau played an important part in a movement to prevent the dumping of French atomic waste in the Mediterranean Sea. Similarly, he began to draw attention to overfishing, garbage dumping, coral reef destruction, oil spills, killing of dolphins and mineral exploitation. This type of campaigning is at the heart of the Cousteau Society's mission.

Cousteau transformed the way in which we study the undersea world, shifting the focus onto both exploring the oceans yet at the same time preserving them. The principles of which were championed in universities the world over with courses like the University of Hull's 'Coastal Marine Biology Degree' which places heavy emphasis on conservation volunteering from its students, owing much to the landmark work carried out by the French ➡

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marine explorers passion for preservation and knowledge.

Much like the enigmatic French underwater explorer, the degree also calls for applicants to have a 'can do' attitude and a passion for biology and the environment. Apart from a solid scientific grounding in practical laboratory work, the course also prepares participants for an extensive field study module in destinations such as Brazil, Egypt and Mallorca as part of their final year. But as Cousteau himself would admit, any study of the sea must also be approached from a hands-on perspective and with that in mind, Hulls Coastal Marine Biology degree emphasises practical skills, covering three main strands; the biology and ecology of coasts and seas, the physical nature of the marine environment, and coastal management issues. Equally important and vital if a true understanding of life below the waves is to be fully appreciated, participants also complete the course with dive training to a professional level.

## Awards and honours

Through more than 115 television films and 50 books, Captain Cousteau opened-up the oceans to millions of households, so it is no surprise that Cousteau's career was spectacularly glittered with awards and honours. As well as an Oscar and war medal, Emmy's and honorary degrees from top universities, Cousteau received the International Environmental Prize from the UN in 1977, the US Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1985, National Geographic Society's Centennial Award and was finally inducted into the prestigious Academie Francaise in 1989.

In the latter stages of his life, Cousteau took on a more philosophical look, questioning everybody's position in the world and reason for being here. 'The question that I am posing is: What are we here for, and what is the goal of life,' he once said. To Cousteau, there were only two things that really counted; the joy of living, which can only be reached through sharing, and the pride of being a human. This outlook on life is surely recognisable in the legacy he left behind.


Sadly just a year before Cousteau's death in 1997, his pride and

joy the *Calyпсо* was badly damaged and sunk after a barge in Singapore accidentally rammed into the grand vessel causing it to sink. However, all is not lost.

The Cousteau Society has been rebuilding the ship to restore it to its former glory and open it to the public as a touring educational exhibition. Fully equipped with the aqua-lung and much more emblematic equipment that Cousteau used during his expeditions, to celebrate his centenary and keep his legacy alive.

As Tarik Chekchak, Director of the Cousteau Society's Science and Environment says, 'The oceans occupy nearly 72% of our planet's surface. They are the place where life appeared 3.8 billion years ago and remain the largest living space in our known universe. Nevertheless, less than 20% has been explored by humans and we have already damaged most of it'.

Even with Cousteau's countless achievements, there still remains much to be explored and repaired, to keep his philosophy alive.

For more information about the centenary celebrations please visit: [www.cousteau.org/](http://www.cousteau.org/) 



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