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Interview with Fabien Cousteau on his role with SeaKeepers and ocean conservation

The explorer and aquanaut from the famous Cousteau family and eldest grandson of Jacques Cousteau is embarking on his next adventure

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Fabien Cousteau is currently in [Singapore](#) in association with SeaKeepers to raise awareness on a number of issues concerning the health of our oceans. The non-profit organisation is at the forefront of promoting oceanographic research, conservation and education thanks to its work with the yachting community to get more people involved to raise awareness. Their Discovery Yachts Program is a trifecta of scientific expeditions, instrument deployment and educational outreach. We sit down with Cousteau, the previous winner of the heralded [SeaKeepers Award](#), to discuss his plans.

What is your relationship with SeaKeepers? How did it come to be and could you share a little bit on what you're working on together?

My father was involved in SeaKeepers and I heard of the organisation through him. But I wasn't involved yet, though I participated in expeditions and other activities from a very young age. It was funny because it was almost in synchronicity with Dr Sylvia Earle— a long-time family friend— who had mentioned SeaKeepers. Michael Moore actually had come up to me and said 'we're changing things around a little bit and we need an advisory council. Would you like to be on it?' I was honoured to have been asked, and graciously accepted the offer. At that point, it was Sylvia and a couple of other people that had jumped on board in (2006 or 2007).

Since then it's been a wonderful relationship filled with lots of changes and refocusing due to the importance of what's been going on in our planet. I think that the biggest change is going from a technology based within [yachts](#) to a focus on things like climate change and volunteerism, something of paramount importance to those who have yachts and are able to dedicate time to very important research.

We have to be focused on what we are facing on this planet, including what's happening in the US and around the world: budget cuts happening within the different government and scientific entities out there, especially with regard to [climate change](#), pollution and the overconsumption of natural resources.

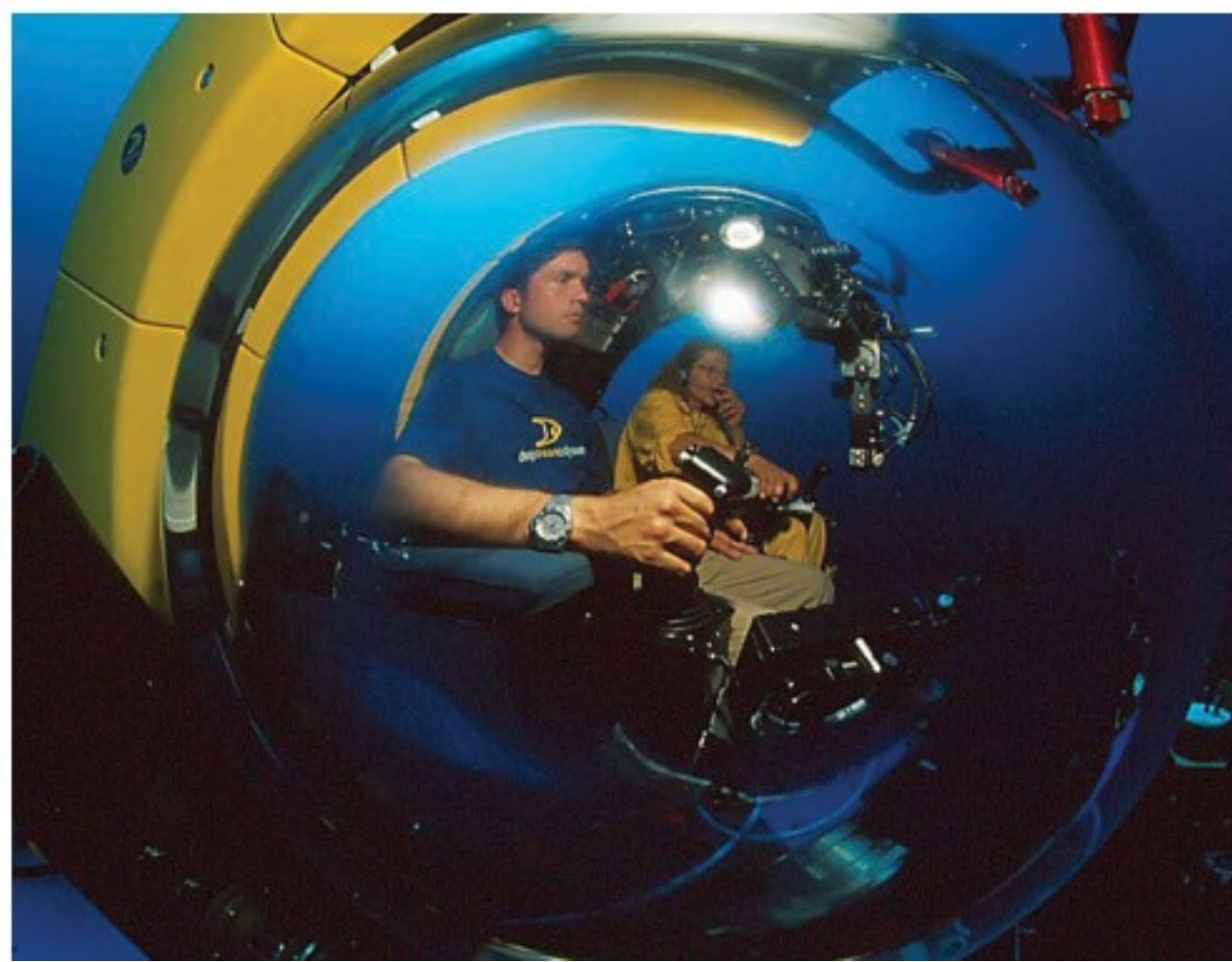
It further highlights how important platforms like SeaKeepers are to keep us in the know, and what better than those who focus their love on the oceans? So with that, being able to use these platforms to do research is an unbelievable asset for scientists and researchers around the world .

Right now, my being here is to think about strategic partnerships between SeaKeepers and the [Fabien Cousteau Ocean Learning Centre](#), as well as across other platforms. That is what we're all working and trying to figure out now.

There is a lot of opportunity in this day and age to put all the pieces of the puzzle together. Our common goals are something we can't overlook. There's a lot of good stuff out there.

**How would you be working with SeaKeepers, specifically in South East Asia?
Is there any type of program out here that you're involved in?**

Well, I'm here for the party! (laughs) This is a very important moment because now there's a footprint of sea keepers in [Asia](#) that will hopefully propagate all over the region, not only the importance of SeaKeepers itself but hopefully the industry. To be able to have that reach here, the reach not only for the platform that SeaKeepers is but also the message is of paramount importance.



Because we have a growing yachting industry here in Asia?

Well absolutely, I could totally see [Singapore](#) being the epicentre of the yachting industry in Asia for sure. Maybe like [Monaco](#) or Fort Lauderdale.

I know that before SeaKeepers and up to now you've been involved in various expeditions, adventures and whatnot. What would you say has been your favourite one so far and why?

Well my favourite one is the next one (laughs).

So what's the next one going to be?

Well if I told you that I'd have to kill you and break your phone. Well, we have a bunch of projects. I've been [scuba diving](#) since I was four, and have been on expeditions with my family since I was 7. It's something I couldn't imagine being without because it's not only the thrill of adventure but also the passion of seeking knowledge. Going out and trying to find answers and new info on why we're on this planet and why and how this planet works. Whether it's new species or new scientific data, or just a new part of the planet I haven't been to before. And we could happen on a discovery that could bring you a cure for cancer! The possibilities are infinite! Having only explored 5% of our ocean world today, there's a lot left out there for us to benefit from.

There are several projects on the dock end. I have 2 platforms that I work off of, one of them is my non-profit: Fabien Cousteau Ocean Learning Centre, which has projects of its own. Be it audio-visual projects in the SEE category, which are to engage in and inform people in an audiovisual way through online or audio-visual films. Or whether it be in learning platforms which are interactive in nature such as being able to do symposiums with the young and young at heart. It is exciting to have them bring solutions that they have implemented in their societies and in their communities and be able to share this with other groups of young people who might be able to stand to learn from that. So it's an interactive information exchange.

How do you go about connecting the people through symposiums?

Symposiums, for example, a beach cleanup is another example. This is an age-old platform that engages people and makes them feel like they're learning the importance of something, what its cause may be and how we can prevent it. It's an ongoing process when we're talking about dumping 9 million metric tonnes of plastic in our oceans every hour of every day. We have a lot of progress to make and there are a lot of opportunities there.

I'm a hopeful realist. I see what we are facing in our everyday lives, and they're monumental challenges that could crush the souls of people. But if we take these problems one-step at a time and see it as a way to create change and innovation, to create job opportunities and create economic benefit done in the right way, it benefits both our society as well as the environment. So that's really part of the learning aspect of things.

The third part of the programme involves projects, which are restoration initiatives in different parts of the world. Be it fishermen from El Salvador or school children in Florida, planting mangroves, protecting sea turtle nests etc. That's one aspect.

The other aspect is the expeditions themselves, the way our family has traditionally done. Going out and seeking strange new worlds so to speak, to quote another famous series (laugh).

Is the Plant a Fish programme separate from the Ocean Learning Centre?

No. Plant a Fish has been absorbed into the Ocean Learning Centre. Plant a Fish was wonderful as an altruistic grassroots platform that has outgrown its seams. We've created the Ocean Learning Centre to take that next step, so all those programmes have been absorbed into the Ocean Learning Centre.

Mission 31: I remember when you did the Ted Talk you were discussing that before, there were many underwater laboratories, but today I think there's just one left.

There were a dozen and a half in all of history since 1958. There was the first one my grandfather started. Today there's just the undersea research laboratory. It's 26 years old now, called Aquarius and that's the one that we use for Mission 31, two and a half years ago.

Why do you think there is only one of these underwater facilities left? You said there were several in the past.

The financial models are very difficult. It needs support from either the private or government sector in order to function, and it's not an inexpensive endeavor. But I see it as being a huge opportunity, for you're still building a city at the final front here on this planet. So there's a multifold benefit to whether it's for space exploration or whether it's for extreme environments. There are a lot synergistic opportunities for space exploration. In fact, [NASA](#) still uses Aquarius for its Nemo missions despite its age. This is for science and research purposes, not only physiologically and psychology for human beings, but also in the anticipation of cures.

With your body being at that level of pressure and depth, you have a unique luxury, which is the luxury of time underwater, something not afforded in any other way. You could use a submarine to go deeper, but you're segregated from the environment and eventually have to go out after six to 10 hours. 10 hours is a long time in a research sub, but you still have to go back and do your experiments on the surface.

Well there are many advantages and many problems. With a research lab, you could bring your research back still under the same pressures, so you're not affecting the subject that you're studying, whereas if you bring it back to the surface there are a lot of considerations.

In the case of Mission 31 for example, we were able to do over 3 years worth of science in 31 days as compared to someone doing it from a research vessel and that's not to say that one takes away from the other. They're both fundamentally very important platforms. But they're very different. As a matter of fact, if anything, they have very good synergy behind it. And having a house underwater we needed surface support, we had two boats ourselves that would support the endeavors.

It's a matter of budgets, budget cuts, same thing with space explorations, there have been budget cuts there too on a different scale. Again taking the US as an example for budgets, they spend a hundred times more on space exploration traditionally rather than ocean exploration. And I imagine that some countries have a different ratio for that especially if they don't have a space program. And yet we're beholden to everything that happens to the ocean for our very livelihoods, directly or indirectly.

Well you always hear about space, space, space but you don't always hear as much about what's being done or researched in the ocean, as there's still such a large amount that could be done.

Well we take the ocean for granted, we always have. Look at history in the last 20,000 years, it's there. It's at our beck and call, it's at our disposal. It's a beautiful place, a romantic place. It's something that sings to our hearts but can be very dangerous as well. So there's this very interesting yin yang relationship that we have with the ocean world, that would explain in part at least why we haven't gone further and deeper. It's a very difficult place to go, we didn't use to have the technology that we have now.

I would argue that with the right amount of support, we could go to the farthest reaches of the ocean. It's just a matter of applying that technology, the engineering and scientific knowledge that we have now, that we have accumulated for the last 30-40 years. We could adapt our bodies to go to places that we couldn't go to before, including different ways of being able to breathe, which is one of our limitations being air breathing creatures. We need to stop breathing air and grow some gills or start breathing that liquid oxygen (laughs).



Would you do it again?

Absolutely! Without a doubt. It was a huge opportunity that has been overlooked. I feel that there's been a resurgence of interest in underwater habitats. I've heard rumours that there are plans out there to build other research facilities in other areas in other countries.

Beyond the adventure and exploration prospect, as an adventurer and explorer, of course, I'm going to be interested in this, but on an engineering, scientific and medical level there are many tangible benefits to be had. e.g. Pharmaceutical companies, etc. We were working with a pharmaceutical company a few weeks ago; we spoke at South-by-South West. Our platform was named 'erasing climate change to find the cure'. And it was really talking about ocean conservation and exploration along with biomedical research before that data gets destroyed by the changing [climate](#).

This particular company is based in [San Diego](#), working with Scripps and has found components of deep-water sponges and chemical components that are now key components to cure malaria which is a huge problem around the world. They've also found components that could cure certain types of cancer. They're working on that right now, from those deep-water sponges. And these are right at the fringe of what research subs can go to, so there's a lot of opportunity here.

It's not just for conservation, it's not just for adventure and research and discovering. There are actual tangible benefits for natural resources.

We have scientists that we do work with such as Dr. Leonid Moroz, who does genome sequencing and is from the University of Florida. We've done probably seven missions with him on different yachts and basically, he's developed a lab that can be put on a yacht. The benefit is that rather than take a specimen and bring it back to land to do the genome sequencing, which depreciates it too much so they don't get accurate data, he takes the specimen out of the ocean, into the yacht and does the genome sequencing.

Less than 1% of the ocean's species have their genomes sequenced, so we have 99% to go. Something will be developed to cure malaria, cancer, or cure something. It's just a matter of time and doing the work. What SeaKeepers brings to the table is that for somebody like Dr. Leonid Moroz, 90% of the cost of his ocean research comes from his research vessel. So we get our yacht owners to donate the time on their yachts so he gets to eliminate that cost and gets to do that much more work.

At the end of the day, the driving factors are costs especially for researchers and scientists. If they're able to find funds, then they could do a lot more research. That's a key component of why we're here.

Is there anyway to get other people in the industry involved, whether its cruise ship companies or cruise liners, cargo operators?

The answer is yes, and we try. The benefit of yacht owners is that they try and they want to use their yachts for good whereas ocean liners and shipping companies have tight schedules and budgets. For you to ask them to stop and do genome sequencing is another question. On the other hand, to ask a yacht owner to stop and have his family learn about genome sequencing is very easy to do.

I was just about to say that the wonderful thing about yacht owners is you can get them involved and that's something that's really exciting because everyone learns and everyone gets impassioned with what's going on. But we would love to partner with cruise ships and freighters. The more the merrier. There's a huge network of opportunity.

Do you have any films or TV programs coming up? For example like Sweet Spot in Time?

Yeah, we are working on Sweet Spot in summer. There's several so there's the [Cannes Film Festival](#) where my family is working on a feature that will be coming, that we sold at the Cannes Film Festival. That's May 23rd I think. We're currently working on finding funding for Sweet Spot actually.

I normally wouldn't go into something like this, but because this young man reminds me of myself when I was his age: this 16-year old, impassioned, American kid that lives in [Canada](#). Knew nothing about the ocean, but had a really good connection with his grandfather, who grew up in an era where you never wasted anything. If you had a nail that was twisted, you would straighten it out and reuse it. He learned all these little life lessons from his grandfather and started thinking about the planet. He had learned a lot about the beauty of the planet through schools, history and everything else, and decided to go on some of his own little adventures around the world, realising that some of these places are not the same. So he started getting really concerned and started looking and digging for answers and for people who were seeking to find solutions.

This journey is really the crux of the documentary itself, finding people who don't take impossible as the answer. Who look and create solutions for a better tomorrow and for a better planet so that we can hope to come back to a semblance of balance with nature.

So that's one project which falls under the Ocean Learning Center for the SEE project. There are several other expeditions coming up as well that will end up in a TV series, we're working on a couple. We also have books, such as the 3rd edition of Colby Manatee. There's also a book on National Geographic on Astronauts and Aquanauts that just came out. There's the cartoon series and a bunch of things that we're working on in the fourth quarter of 2017 and first quarter of 2018.



Are they going to be primarily focused in the US?

No, they'll cover locations all over the world. The ocean is the great unifier and water connects us all. There's only one ocean, whether it may be the Indian Ocean or [Pacific Ocean](#), there's only one. Another expression is 'No blue no green' from Dr. Sylvia Earle. That's the only thing that makes our planet unique. You take the blue away and its just a lifeless rock in space just like all the others, who are lifeless as far as we know.

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If you weren't exploring oceans and participating in marine research, what do you think you would've done or would do?

I'd be exploring the oceans of Mars! You know the final frontiers of pushing beyond the boundaries of what we know is interesting to me. Living within a box isn't interesting. Going beyond the box, that's where my curiosity lies. Why live an ordinary life?

Whatever your definition of extraordinary is, you should be living it because as far as I know, we only have one round at this, maybe we don't who knows, but I'm going to live it as though we do, that's why I'm an explorer. I can't just sit there watching paint dry, it drives me crazy. Curiosity, and I'm not a cat so that's okay (laugh). At the end of the day, it's to satisfy myself and hopefully some of the information we bring back is helpful to others and can be used for the betterment of society.

Is there something in particular that you're aiming to achieve? Like one goal that you haven't achieved yet?

I really believe that we need to spend time in the mid layer of the ocean. I would say the bottom of the Mariana Trench but that's so trite. How about the 7 deepest trenches?

It will require some very fancy engineering but I have in mind a type of submersible that will be able to take the 3 of us down for up to 7 days at 21,000 feet (approx. 7,000 metres) which goes well below the medium depth which is about 12,000 feet (approx. 4,000 metres). This would allow us the reach necessary to go to most places on this planet. Beyond 7000 metres is trickier engineering-wise, but at this point in time we could do it tomorrow. The will needs to be there that's all. Technology-wise, we could do it.

Would you like our readers to know anything else about the project?

I think what unifies all the things we talked about is something my grandfather said to us when we were younger and continued to say in public, which was 'People protect what they love, they love what they understand and they understand what they're taught. How can people protect what they don't understand? It's really about education at the end of the day, about impassioning people, getting them involved and giving back a planet in better shape than we've perceived it. We've taken it for granted for too long. If we want to be able to return to our children what we've taken advantage of, we better start now. Or yesterday.