

Cousteau, Jacques

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(1910–1997)



Jacques-Yves Cousteau was a French oceanographic explorer and filmmaker who was best known for his prime time television series in the 1960s and 1970s, his role in the development of the first self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (SCUBA) equipment, and his advocacy for conservation of the marine environment.

Cousteau had no formal education in science or engineering. However, later in his career he was awarded honorary degrees (DSc) from California, Harvard, and Ghent. He entered the French Naval Academy in 1930, and eventually reached the rank of captain. His initial intention was to be a navy pilot but he seriously injured one of his arms in a car accident, ending his flying career. He started swimming to strengthen his arm and developed his love for swimming in the sea. Cousteau subsequently experimented with goggles, snorkels and other diving equipment. Cousteau and Émile Gagnan, an engineer from Paris, developed the Aqua-Lung (i.e., the first SCUBA gear) in 1943. This revolutionized diving since it freed divers from heavy diving suits requiring cumbersome air hoses and lifelines. The invention allowed free swimming and facilitated greater exploration of the ocean.

During World War II, Captain Cousteau conducted espionage for the French Resistance. He received decorations (e.g., Croix de Guerre) and was made Knight of the Legion of Honour for his efforts. After the war and with money from a British philanthropist (Thomas Loël Guinness), he acquired a decommissioned American-constructed minesweeper that had served in the British navy. He used this ship, the *Calypso*, for ocean exploration until it sank in Singapore Harbor in 1996. Cousteau and Jean Mollard, an engineer, developed a miniature submarine known as the Diving Saucer (1959) that allowed deep sea observation. He also developed other underwater equipment, conducted studies on underwater living and helium–oxygen diving techniques, and improved color photography by perfecting the underwater camera.

Cousteau greatly raised public awareness of ocean issues as a prodigious author and filmmaker. His book, *The Silent World*, published in 1953, was enormously successful. It sold five million copies and was translated into 22 languages. His subsequent extensive number of highly successful books included *The Living Sea*, *The Whale – Mighty Monarch of the Sea*, and *Jacques Cousteau's Calypso*. His 1956 film, *The Silent World*, won the Academy Award for best documentary. He also won Academy Awards for *The Golden Fish* (1959) and *World Without Sun* (1964). Cousteau's series of television documentaries, *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* (1968–1976), popularized marine issues and educated the public. By the end of his career he had written or contributed to more than 50 books and at least 150 films.

Jacques Cousteau earned numerous honors during his 70 year career. He was the director of the Musée Océanographique de Monaco for 31 years (despite lacking a science degree), a member of the United States National Academy of Sciences and a member of the Académie Française. Other honors include the Special Gold Medal of the National Geographic Society (1961), placement on the United Nations Environment Programme's Global 500 Roll of Honour for Environmental Achievement (1988), and the James Smithsonian Bicentennial Medal from the Smithsonian Institute (1996). Despite these honors, he has stated that he felt his success in increasing public awareness and concern for the ocean was his greatest achievement. The efforts of Jacques Cousteau for advocacy and promotion of ocean conservation are continued by the Cousteau Society Inc., which he founded in 1973.

Photo: from Columbia and "The Silent World."

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