

Prince of the oceans

An obituary of Jacques-Yves Cousteau

Captain Jacques-Yves Cousteau, the legendary manfish who opened the mysteries of the unknown 'planet ocean' – the living world under the seas – to millions of readers and viewers throughout the world, died in Paris at the age of 87 on 25 June 1997. A sailor, a diver, a naval officer, a prolific writer, an explorer, an inventor, a cinematographer, a self-taught naturalist and a pioneering environmentalist, Cousteau's face was more familiar than anybody else's mainly through his popular TV serial, *The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau* and his many documentaries and books. Among friends and collaborators (he had called himself JYC pronounced as 'Zheek'), JYC was a man with a sense of humour, someone who was alternately serious and sardonic, a man with conviction, a celebrity whose existence was both emphatic and detached.

For more than half a century, he probed the underworld that virtually he discovered in his beloved wooden vessel *Calypso* which made numerous voyages around all the continents and even the big rivers of China and Latin America. He invented the 'Aqualung' or the self-contained underwater breathing apparatus (SCUBA), which made skin-diving for marine adventure safe. As a result, at present there are more than a million people throughout the world who have taken to the sea for adventure and recreation. In 1986, he added one more vessel named *Alcyone* with specially designed aluminium sails honeycombed with solar cells, under the stewardship of his son Jean-Michael Cousteau to complete part of the 'Rediscovery' mission.

As a part of the rediscovery expeditions, JYC was given special permission by the Government of India for a joint Indo-French exploration of marine life around Andaman and Nicobar islands during March–April, 1989. This writer had the proud privilege of being a member of the Indian team aboard *Calypso* for two weeks. In this celebrity, I found a cordial and respectful personality with poetic dreams, a philosopher's vision and at the

same time, a scientist's accuracy of observation. We would take reports after each dive from the team of divers and if something unusual was found, he would call us, the Indian team for briefing. Once after diving around Southbank islands, he reported that about 10–12 years ago, cyclonic storm must have destroyed coral reefs beneath the surface and a regeneration would take at least sixty years under favourable conditions. From our memory, we recollected the cyclone of 1977, exactly 12 years ago. He dreamt of a better vessel *Calypso II* to replace *Calypso I* which served for six decades. He also showed us the design of *Calypso II* as early as 1989.



Photo: Karsh

He could not collect enough funds to fulfil his dream even when *Calypso I* subsequently sank in 1996.

Cousteau won three Academy Awards (Oscar) for best documentary films for *The Silent World* (1957), *La Poisson Rouge* (1959) and *World Without Sun* (1965). He founded the Cousteau Foundation and the Cousteau Society with offices at Paris and New York, whose membership now is over 200,000. He has authored more than 80 books, and a 20-volume encyclopedia *The*

Ocean World, and dozens of articles. He also produced several full length feature films and about a hundred short films for TV. He received many prestigious awards and honours including Grand Prix awards, gold medal from National Geographic Society, Washington and Royal Geographic Society, London, honorary fellowship of Academy of Sciences of US, France, Indian Academy of Sciences, International Environment Prize of United Nations, honorary doctorate in Science from Universities of California at Berkeley, Brandeis, Harvard, Ghent, etc.

JYC was born on 11 June 1910 near Bourdeaux in France. His parents were Daniel and Elizabeth. In 1937, JYC married Simone who remained his companion on land and sea for 53 years (Mrs Simone Cousteau was the only female member in *Calypso* and used to spend almost 9 months a year on the sea). Simone was probably the world's first woman scuba diver. He has given us a new definition of prosperity which means 'a wealth which transcends national boundaries and which is ultimately global'. In fact, he was the first protagonist of conservation in the fifties, during making of the film *The Silent World* when ecology and biodiversity conservation were not common jargons. He brought to the world attention, the danger of overharvesting the ocean and equated their practice to 'vandalism', i.e. akin to damaging public property. It was a concept that served as a beacon for subsequent environmental movements.

In a fitting tribute to JYC, let us now pledge for preserving tomorrow's heritage:

'One earth, One water, One people, One hope.'

RADHA KANTA MANDAL

Department of Biochemistry,
Acharya J. C. Bose Birth Centenary Building,
P-1/12, CIJ Scheme VII M,
Calcutta 700 054, India