After the Fact | Ocean, People, Planet: Conservation Across Generations

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TRANSCRIPT

Philippe Cousteau Jr., ocean conservationist, filmmaker, cofounder of EarthEcho International: My first memories of the ocean are kind of intertwined with my first memories, period. When you're a little, three or four-year-old, all of it is mystical and magical. And for me, it was those early, early, days in the South of France with my grandfather, with crew members, et cetera. And listening to stories about the ocean and then going out and pretending to be on expedition myself looking through the little tide pools for any tiny little snail or living creature.

Dan LeDuc, host: Welcome to "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. Many of us have early childhood memories of trips to the beach or wandering along creeks, exploring the pools and puddles. But we aren't the grandson of the famed undersea explorer, Jacques Cousteau, who introduced a generation of television viewers to the undersea world that had rarely been seen before on their screens. Today, Phillippe Cousteau and his wife Ashlan are explorers and conservationists in their own right.

Ashlan Cousteau, ocean conservationist, filmmaker: Even though, obviously, I wasn't born a Cousteau, and saltwater does not run through my blood like it does through Philippe's, I grew up in North Carolina. And North Carolina, I still, to this day, think has some of the most beautiful beaches. With the Outer Banks and the dunes and the seagrass, I mean, it's just so perfect. And so, when I was little, I would always look out in the waves and just wonder what was under—what was down there.

Dan LeDuc: While the Cousteau family, for three generations, has been educating the public about the sea, they find that much remains to be done to help people learn about the ocean and its essential role in the health of the planet and the global economy.

Ashlan Cousteau: I think that there is a lack of ocean knowledge. If we actually were to figure out what the ocean's GDP was, it would be around the seventh largest in the world. So, technically, the ocean should have a seat at the G7 summit.

Dan LeDuc: Ashlan brings us to the data point for this episode, our final chapter in our series "Ocean, People, Planet." $2.5 trillion. The GDP of the ocean was valued at more than $2.5 trillion according to a World Wildlife Fund report. That, in 2015, in fact, put the ocean as the seventh largest economy in the world. But this resource is under some of the greatest threats its ever faced in modern world history. The Cousteaus are leaders in a new generation of ocean conservationists that we'll learn more about in our conversation with them.

Thanks so much for joining us, Philippe and Ashlan Cousteau. The Cousteau name, of course, is synonymous with the ocean. That enthusiasm for the ocean is more than just a family thing. It's really become your life's work for both of you.

Philippe Cousteau: My father, Philippe Sr., directed films and produced 26 episodes of "The Undersea World" with Jacques Cousteau. He had his own series, "Oasis in Space." He'd won multiple Emmys and was really my grandfather's right hand. He died in an airplane accident, tragically, six months before I was born. I never knew him, but I did know my grandfather. He lived until I was about 17. Growing up, I certainly had a curiosity about that world. And I think part of it was as a way to connect with my father.

And it wasn't, though, until I was 16 years old that I went to Papua New Guinea with Dr. Eugenie Clark, who is one of the most extraordinary people in the world, period, let alone one of the first female oceanographers, and a pioneering scientist and conservationist. And I got to go for a two-week expedition with her to Milne Bay in the far eastern island chain of Papua New Guinea. And I remember we'd be diving during the day. And we were doing research, observational research, on a few species of fish she had discovered.

Then on our days off, we would hike up into these mountains around these bays. And I remember one day we were hiking through, and we found these caves with human skulls in them going back hundreds of years. To a 16-year-old boy, it felt like Indiana Jones. I mean, here we are diving during the day. And then, we're trading with these remote Tribes that are coming out in dugout canoes to trade fruit for rice and flour.

I was like, wow, I see why my father and grandfather did this. That was really, for me the "a-ha" moment that really inspired me to want to pursue this kind of adventurous career.

Ashlan Cousteau: I grew up wanting to explore and wanting to travel. I wanted to be a storyteller and have a life of adventure. So, my dream job was to work for an entertainment show, E! News. And I landed that job. I did that job. And I really understood the power of storytelling, the power of pop culture. And when I met Philippe, I thought to myself, oh my God, this guy is the real-life Indiana Jones, and I would really like to talk about him and his work. My gosh. I can use my skills as a storyteller and my skills of pop culture and get people excited about the ocean and get

people excited about saving the planet. While I came to ocean conservation as my second career, I truly believe that it was a calling.

Dan LeDuc: Those are both great perspectives. Philippe let me ask you to think back to the 16-year-old that you were and diving and everything. How do you think the ocean, as we view it now, has changed from those days when you were a young man, or when your grandfather was doing some of the first explorations that really sort of opened up this world to so many television viewers? And how does it compare to today?

Philippe Cousteau: It's a great question. I think about this often. And when I look back at the old films, movies like “The Silent World,” “World Without Sun,” and even earlier than that, some of the shorts that my grandfather did back in the late 1940s, post-war, early '50s—I think about a perspective that we had in the ocean that was dramatically different than the one we have today.

It was a perspective about this endless, bountiful place that we could dump whatever we wanted into, pull whatever we wanted out of. And there would be few if any consequences. When I think that humanity has crisscrossed the ocean for millennia, and yet, really, it wasn't until the late 1940s after the war, when my grandfather began to popularize this invention that he created, this aqualung, this valve that could take gases under pressure and convert them to ambient air pressure on demand, and you could breathe off of it–I mean, until that, we knew very little about the ocean.

And then he tinkered and created underwater cameras. None of this existed at the time. And yet, in the beginning, even for him, the ocean was this mysterious, amazing, bountiful place. It wasn't until my father's generation that, as a young man, he began to notice the health of the Mediterranean decline dramatically from the 1940s to early 1950s, when he was a boy, through to the 1960s, when he really started to do this as a career.

And so, when I think about my grandfather's generation, it's really a generation of exploration, of seeing all of these things for the first time. In the '60s and '70s, with the rise of the Earth Movement and Earth Day, my father said, “It's no longer about exploration. This needs to be about conservation. Our work needs to change.”

And when I think about our generation, the good news is that we understand the challenges that we're facing. And now it needs to be a generation of participation and restoration.

Dan LeDuc: That’s an important transition. It's not just about the beautiful marine life—which is important—but also about the people who live by the sea where it's integral to their livelihoods and culture. And that has got to be one of the ways you can help communicate the concerns about the ocean.

Ashlan Cousteau: One hundred percent. A lot of people, when they think of climate change, think of a polar bear. They don't think of their child having asthma. They don't think of not being able to put food on the table for their family. You are so right on. We really always try to figure out, What's the human connection? Because humans connect with humans. And while we love fish, and we love dolphins, and we love whales—fish, specifically—they're not that super cute and cuddly. So, a lot of people, they're just trying to deal with what's in their daily life. But when you can connect with people on that human level, that's when you get people excited about conservation. That's when you get people excited about saving the planet.

Dan LeDuc: For many people today, they still stand on the beach and look out at this vast beautiful ocean and think, "Well, it's just so big and enormous. Nothing's ever going to happen to this. We can do whatever we want. And it's going to be OK." How do we get that message across that it's not OK?

Ashlan Cousteau: I think that people just don't really understand how precious it is. And they always think about land-based solutions or land-based problems. Nobody ever really thinks to the ocean. Even when you live in the middle of the country, in the middle of a desert, your oxygen and your [rainfall] and your climate is all because of the ocean. But on the flip side, the ocean is also our biggest key to combating climate change.

Philippe Cousteau: Ashlan makes a great point that so many of the solutions that we need are ocean-related. One square acre of mangroves absorbs more carbon than a square acre of rainforest—four or five times more. Kelp can grow at foot a day. A tree can take years. We, I think as a conservation community, historically has done a pretty poor job of communicating that the ocean is also a source of hope and opportunity and solving problems because that resonates with people. Young people already understand that there's issues and that climate change is this catastrophe that's looming. There is a broad consensus amongst young people that there are problems that are urgent that we need to solve, and the ocean is a big part of that. So that's good.

Dan LeDuc: You both travel extensively. You're both in the ocean, literally, as part of your work, right? Ashlan, you just got back, as I understand it, from a trip to the Southern Ocean in Chile. Can you talk a little bit about some of those experiences?

Ashlan Cousteau: Yeah, so I'd like to brag a little bit, not that it's a competition.

Philippe Cousteau: Clearly, it is.

Ashlan Cousteau: Clearly, it is. I, the non-Cousteau Cousteau, that was actually my second trip to Antarctica.

Philippe Cousteau: It was my first.

Ashlan Cousteau: It was Philippe's first trip but my second trip to Antarctica.

Philippe Cousteau: She beat me to seven continents, which, as you can tell, she never reminds me of.

Ashlan Cousteau: The Southern Ocean and Antarctica is one of the most miraculous, powerful, scary, and pristine, and beautiful places on this planet. We feel very lucky that we had the opportunity to go there. Though everybody always talks about oceans, it's really only one ocean. And it's a continual ecosystem. It has its own areas and properties. But, really, it's truly all connected. When we talk about this idea of setting aside special places around the planet, on land and on the ocean, the Southern Ocean really is one of those places that is really important to protect.

Philippe Cousteau: We want to protect all of the ocean. There is no place that is not valuable, but the Southern Ocean stands out.

Ashlan Cousteau: It truly is the anchor for our climate, for our weather, for the nutrients that get passed around our entire world. Just going down there and seeing krill, and seeing the penguins, and seeing whales, and seeing the melting. Watching the land-based ice come off and run into the ocean and hearing—testing the water and seeing the salinity changing right before our eyes. It's such a beautiful place, but it's also very sad because it truly is on the front lines of what our planet is facing.

Dan LeDuc: So, when you came back, what's the first thing you wanted to say to somebody? Not necessarily to prepare a broadcast. But you come back, and you see the kids, or come back and you're seeing close friends, and you tell them, "You're not going to believe where I was. This is the story." What's the story you told?

Philippe Cousteau: We're part of a global board, a group of individuals called, Antarctica2020, that's advocating for the establishment of three marine protected areas around Antarctica. That's why we went down originally on the trip, just to see some areas along the Weddell Sea. And it's no exaggeration to say that we cannot solve this climate, really, catastrophe that we're facing if we can't protect and restore the ocean.

Dan LeDuc: You both are working to develop a new generation of ocean conservationists and have created EarthEcho International, an organization with the mission of inspiring others. Is that giving you hope?

Philippe Cousteau: That's the only thing that gives me hope, actually.

Ashlan Cousteau: That's what keeps us going.

Philippe Cousteau: We've become one of the leading youth environmental education organizations in the world. We had thousands of young people engaged in this program. We had several hundred young people restoring seagrass beds on the coast of Sardinia, to being in Barcelona, [with] a few thousand young people visiting schools for a week around Barcelona and Catalonia that is experiencing record drought levels this year and seeing how fired up and engaged young people are, to the digital programs and the leadership programs that we have in dozens of countries around the world. I've never walked once into a classroom and had a kid stand up and be like, "Meh, climate change, I don't really believe in that."

Part of that is that young people are connected, switched on, and informed in a way that is unprecedented in history. It is then incumbent upon us to invest in education and be able to channel that passion and anxiety that exists into positive places. And that's really what EarthEcho is all about. And we're excited to be leading at the vanguard of that work.

Dan LeDuc: The OceanEcho 30X30 Fellows are the helping lead the effort. These young leaders are part of a new initiative from EarthEcho International, working to support the creation of marine protected areas. We spoke to one of those fellows, Salma Macías Torres. She's in Mexico, where she is studying whale sharks and sharing her passion for ocean conservation.

Salma Macías Torres, EarthEcho International Ocean 30X30 Fellow: Currently, I am living in Bahía de los Ángeles, which is a small fishing community, about 700 people. It is great because we live in the middle of four natural protected areas. So, it is like a natural paradise. The ocean is so clear, and there is a lot of wildlife. There are so many species, whales, and the most important and the most popular is the whale sharks. The whale shark migration is from May to late September. Each year, the whale sharks come, many people from other places, from other, bigger cities, come to the town. So that is an important activity for the town.

Dan LeDuc: You talked about the magic of being underwater. How did you start thinking about the ocean and your interest in marine biology?

Salma Macías: My passion starts since I was a child. We were living near the beach. I start snorkeling at six years old. And I love to explore and see what I can find. I started not only going to the beach, [but also] reading books, reading magazines. And many of these people were marine biologists, so I said, hey, I want to be like these people. I want to be a marine biologist. My mother also encouraged me to get involved. She used to take me to conferences. She took me to the beach as much as she could to do beach cleanups. So, this encouraged me to take this marine biologist path.

Dan LeDuc: You've also launched an educational effort to protect 30% of the ocean waters by 2030. This is an effort around the world called 30x30. What are some of the challenges for you as you've been trying to work on that?

Salma Macías: We divide our campaign with those who live in inland cities away from the ocean: Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey. Many of these people haven't see the ocean, so they're a little bit like, "Why do I have to protect the ocean if I live here and there is no ocean?" We developed workshops for kids. They were so passionate. They know a lot of facts. And they were very interested in getting involved in the campaign. And at the end, we also do the beach cleanup with the Mexico's National Commission of Natural Protected Areas. We also did a petition to the government about why it's important to protect the ocean.

Dan LeDuc: That kind of engagement is what Philippe and Ashlan Cousteau hope to inspire in young leaders.

Ashlan Cousteau: When I grew up, it was always like, "You're the leaders of tomorrow. And when you're 18, you can vote and change the world." And what I find so refreshing, and what I always tell young people when I meet them is, don't listen to that. You are the leaders of today. You can change the world. So, one thing at EarthEcho, it's always empowering these kids. They do not have to wait until some magical day when they're older where they're going to have power. They have power today.

Philippe Cousteau: We have young people from Kenya to the Galapagos to Baltimore doing really impactful projects in their communities, and that then spreads and inspires others, including adults. Our greatest superpower is storytelling. And we see legislatively and politically in this country that young people have a significant influence on adults in political choices and on the other people in their communities, informing them, particularly, around environmental issues. You give them opportunity, tools, and knowledge. One, it is one of the most effective solutions or treatments for the widespread anxiety that exists amongst young people today, which is largely driven by climate anxiety. And it is also the best way to build the kind of civically engaged young people or citizens, period, that we want in society.

Dan LeDuc: We'll give the last word on this to that generation—here's Salma again.

Salma Macías: Get involved in as much activities and opportunities as you can. You can start doing, like, a little beach cleanup with your friends, see if you can eat sustainable fish rather than illegal fish. Those are small changes, but they make a bigger difference. If you are passionate about ocean conservation, just keep the road. I think that everybody could make a difference, no matter your profession or your age or where you live. Because in the end, the ocean connects us.

Dan LeDuc: Thanks for joining us for this season. You can learn more about global efforts to conserve our ocean at pewtrusts.org/oceanpeopleplanet. And make sure you don't miss the next season of "After the Fact" by subscribing wherever you listen to podcasts. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc.