

imax takes the plunge

by dennis rindsem

National Geographic launched the New Year by featuring in its January 1979 volume a series of articles on the Humpback whale. At the same time, a Canadian film company, Mako Films, began to shoot a twenty-minute film for Ontario Place. The connection between these two projects was that Mako's film also included a major sequence on the Humpback. A principal difference between the schemes was the format used by each; *National Geographic* shot superb 35mm stills, while Mako filmed its episodes using the 65mm Imax format.

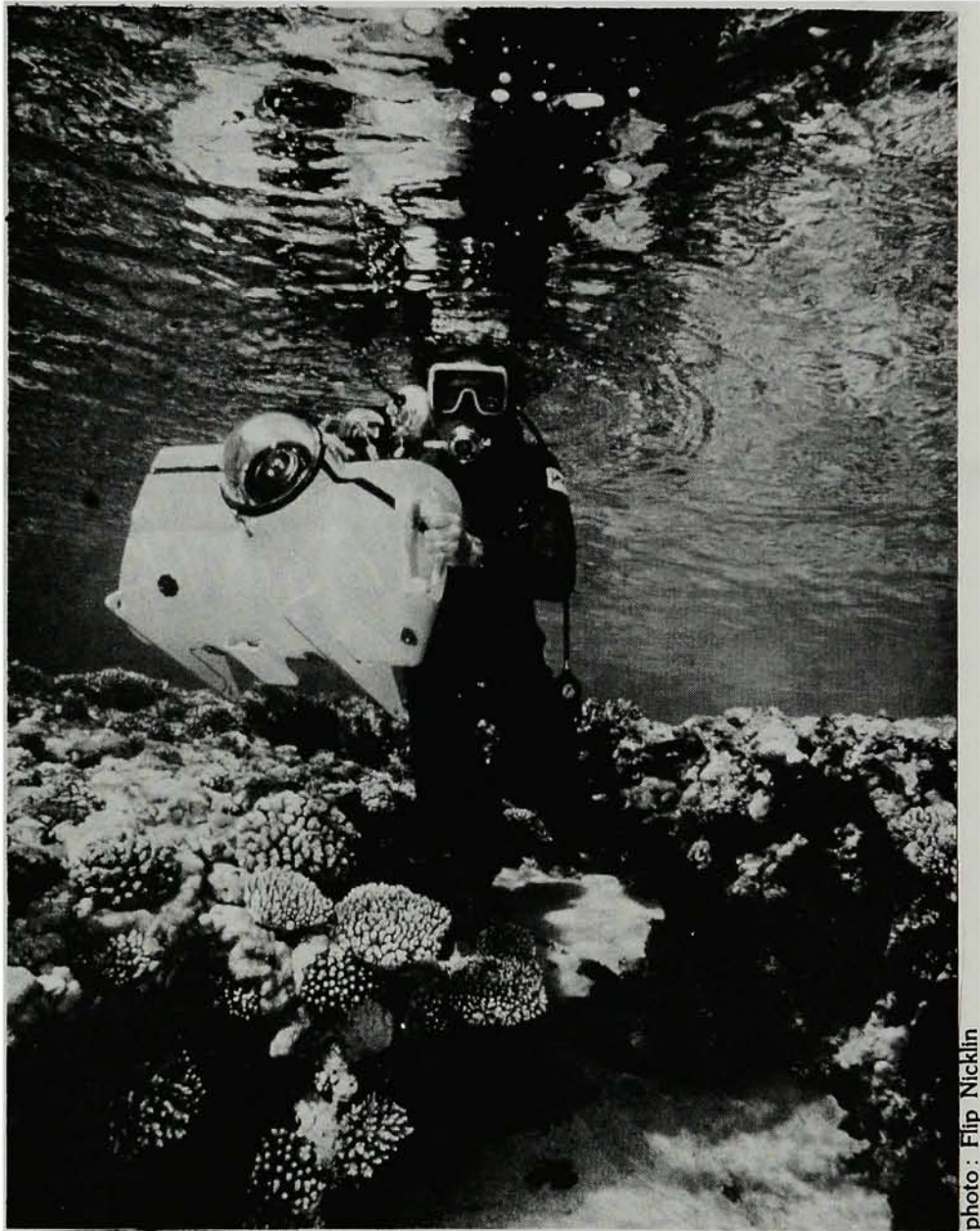
John Stoneman, director and co-underwater cinematographer, chose to shoot the film using the Imax format because, "the Imax format is a visual experience," and the purpose of the film was "to involve the audience in the beauty and excitement of the ocean environment. The Imax system allows the audience to do this without actually getting wet!"

Nomads of the Deep took three months to complete and was shot at three different locations. Because the Red Sea contains an abundant variety of marine life, it was chosen as the first location — to introduce the audience to the underwater realm. The middle section of the film, shot off the coast of California, consists of a shark scene filmed "to show the shark in a more favorable and realistic light than that portrayed in **Jaws**." The final, but perhaps most significant portion of the film was lensed in the breeding grounds of the Humpback whale off the coast of Maui.

The film equipment included two Imax camera bodies, one underwater housing, an assortment of prime lenses (30mm to 650mm), twelve lights, and approximately three-hundred feet of cable. Altogether there were forty-five cases of lights and camera equipment, plus the crew's diving and personal gear.

The crew consisted of two Americans and five Canadians. The Americans, Chuck and Flip Nicklin, were chosen not only because of their extensive under-

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The undersea world of Imax

water filming experience, but specifically because of their previous experience with filming the Humpbacks of Maui in 16mm. Chuck Nicklin, the co-underwater cameraman, had shared similar duties before with underwater cameramen such as Al Gidding (**The Deep**). It was particularly useful to have two underwater cameramen on the **Nomads** shoot because quite

often it was necessary to film at depths of one-hundred, or one-hundred and fifty feet — making it necessary to follow the procedures for decompression. Thus, one cameraman could continue shooting while the other spent the required period of time on the surface waiting for the nitrogen to dissolve out of his blood. Flip Nicklin acted as underwater gaffer and

photo: Flip Nicklin



photo : Flip Nicklin

A little too close for comfort? this Humpback whale surfaces beside Dr. Roger Payne's researchers

stills photographer on location. Divers appearing in the film were shown carrying battery-operated lights whenever possible. This made the addition of other lights — needed to enhance certain shots — seem less artificial. But in shots which did not include the divers, it was necessary to fill-in with a '2K' cabled from the surface. It was Flip's job to run as much as three-hundred feet of cable to this light. Despite the lights, it was still necessary to 'push' all of the underwater footage one 'stop.'

David Keighley and his assistant, Peter Hayman, were responsible for moving the crew and equipment to and from the locations, and dealing with any problems which might arise on location. At one point, while they were shooting in Israel, Keighley had to race five rolls of film to the lab in Los Angeles to inspect the footage. (He may have established some sort of record, as the task was accomplished in under seventy-two hours!)

Every two or three weeks, when the crew was lucky, they had a chance to view their rushes.

David Douglas maintained the Imax camera, and when he wasn't busy with that job he shot the surface footage. He was able to have the Imax camera reloaded and ready to shoot in roughly ten minutes. Just getting the Imax "beast" out of the water proved a chore because it weighed over three-hundred pounds with the housing. In the water, however, it handled beautifully. The Imax people had tested the underwater housing to a depth of four-hundred feet, but recommended that it not be taken below one-hundred and fifty. On several occasions though, it was necessary to follow creatures to depths slightly more than this. Fortunately, there were no problems with the housing — as there is only one other underwater housing in existence!

Shots had to be planned carefully, as the thousand-foot loads only lasted for

roughly three minutes. Consequently, with the exception of the shark scene, all the shots which included divers were storyboarded and rehearsed before shooting. Another interesting problem the cinematographers had to face was composing for the giant screen. Generally, they placed the main action in the bottom third of the frame, because this is where the viewer's eye tends to rest when viewing the vast screen; but, in portions of the film, such as the cave and shark scenes, the action was orchestrated to move the audience's eyes from one part of the screen to another.

Underwater communication is usually limited. The crew tried wet phones for a time, but the standard hand signals were found to be just as effective and easier to use. Very little location sound was recorded, as previous arrangements had been made to use Dr. Roger Payne's stereo recordings. (The famous marine biologist's recordings of the Humpback

have even been carried to outer space by Cape Kennedy spacecrafts.)

David Bondy, having accompanied John Stoneman on many dives, acted as support diver on the shoot. It was Bondy's job to remain alert to any potential danger, so that the rest of the crew could concentrate on filming. In particular, the shark series must have provided him, as well as the rest of the crew, with a few anxious moments. Although they were on hand, power sticks were rarely loaded during this sequence, and the shark cage was used only as a stage prop. The sequence came off without an incident. John did, however, admit to one anxious moment which occurred while the crew was following a Humpback and her calf. The team was about half-a-mile from their ship, when John suddenly heard Bondy's voice over the wet phone: "Below you! Below you!" Looking down, John saw a rather large Dusky Shark only

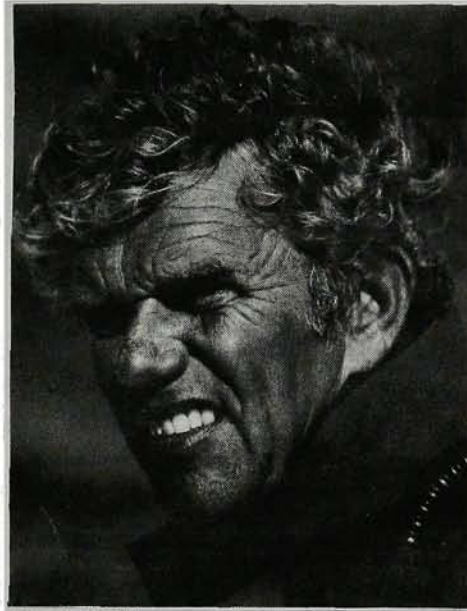


photo : John Stoneman

Chuck Nicklin, co-underwater cinematographer for *Nomads Of The Deep*

tên feet away. Fortunately, the shark was merely curious about the strange parade following the pair of whales, and soon swam off.

There were many other exciting, if less dangerous moments, and the cameramen were able to record some behavior which has never before been observed. They filmed a mother Humpback teaching her calf buoyancy control, and on another occasion, filmed a forty-ton Humpback singing away as it lay on its back in one-hundred feet of water.

The giant format, with its equally weighty actors, will be a hard act to follow. But Stoneman's talk of possible, future plans, such as filming the Right whale and an assortment of other fascinating marine creatures found off the coast of Argentina, indicate that Mako will soon be involved in the production of another, exciting, underwater film we can all look forward to. □

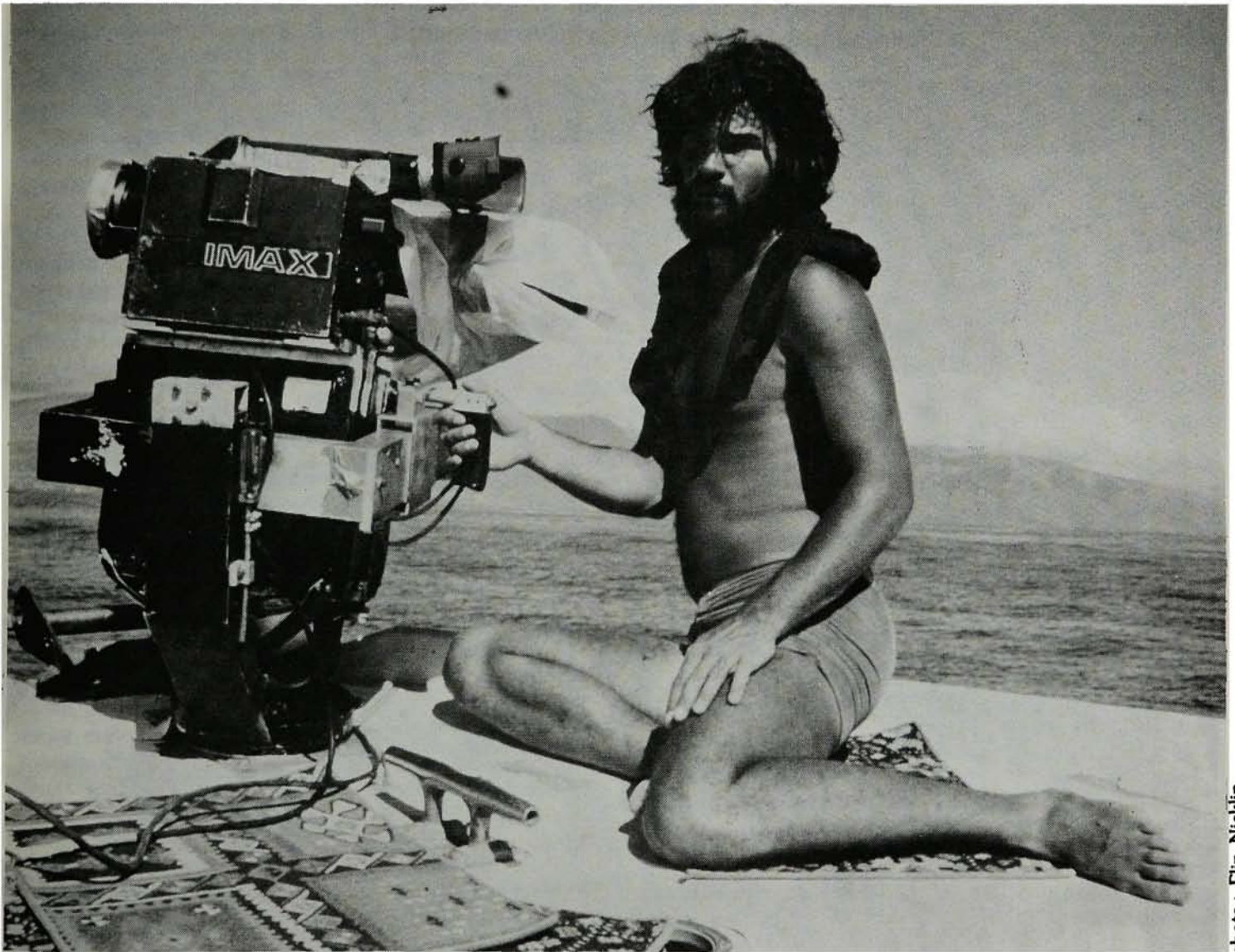


photo : Flip Nicklin

Posing with the star of the show — the Imax — surface photographer David Douglas gets the right exposure