

# OPINION

## The Boat that Jacques Missed

This commentary is *not* a vilification of Jacques Cousteau as a maker of films — although a clarification is necessary, because it *does* deal with him as a negative phenomenon, with particular regard to his recent NFB-sponsored visit to Eastern Canadian waters to make two documentary films. Admittedly, it is difficult to knock a man who has done more through film to raise the world's consciousness (and mine) towards the world's oceans than all the rest of us put together.

In fact, this really has more to do with the Canadian psyche and its passion for importing outsiders — who know *zilch* about the place — and paying them handsomely to tell us what we don't know/ should know/ might otherwise have learned about our own country.

For example, few Canadians know that there are populations of whales in the St. Lawrence River — or at least, they did not know before Jacques went on television to tell them so. I have been trying to tell them for years, with only minor success. But then, I don't have the backing (reputedly to the extent of \$4 million) of the National Film Board of Canada, as did Cousteau. My approaches to the NFB, CBC, OECA and the like did not get me even four cents worth of backing, because, of course, among other things I live here.

Does all this sound like sour grapes? Yes? Well it is. You see, Jacques didn't know either that there were whales in the St. Lawrence — or at least, his New York office didn't know when it contacted me through a friend for information on who might cooperate with the pending Cousteau expedition into Canadian waters.

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I don't necessarily expect Cousteau to know, of course. He is human and cannot know everything. But I do expect the National Film Board of Canada to spread a little of the largess it derives from my taxes *first* in the direction of Canadians working in their own environment.

John Stoneman of Mako Films Ltd., is second to none as a maker of underwater films. He is a Canadian. His company is Canadian and is based here. Stoneman would have been only too happy to make a couple of films with the NFB — and probably for less than half the price. Can it be that the Board's decision makers have not heard of him? I doubt it. He made the enormously successful film *Nomads Of The Deep* which ran at Ontario Place's Cinesphere for three months last summer. I have written extensively of him for *Cinema Canada*, which is presumably read by Board staff members. His films are entered in the same competitive film festivals throughout the continent, as those of the Board, and they too win awards. (Stoneman is well recognized in the U.S., of course). Further, with all due respect to the competence of Cousteau's people as filmmakers, Stoneman's work is better film.

Failing Stoneman, there is also Dr. Joe McInnis. Although he does not style himself solely as a maker of underwater films, he does produce very good work. He was responsible for the *New Wave* series which was carried on the CBC-TV network.

I take issue as well with Cousteau's approach both to making and promoting his films. A lot of it is far from positive. Recently Jacques appeared on network television to explain, for example, how a whale allowed one of his divers to ride its back (for the cameras, no doubt). This is exactly the kind of negative wave that a Cousteau event can create as it sweeps

by, and which those of us who remain after it is gone, strive furiously to dampen. Whales do not *allow* divers to ride their backs in the wild. Divers ride the backs of whales, and either the whales put up with it or object. Either way the animals are stressed by the encounter, and in the case of some whales such an action constitutes blatant harassment, to be discouraged, not encouraged by a folk-figure like Cousteau.

Occasionally, however, we Canadians stand together and on our own feet, as the following anecdote illustrates.

On August 19, the 240-foot *Calypso* sailed into Tadoussac harbour on the Quebec north shore as scheduled. Two weeks later the 40-foot *Beluga* sailed in two months late, because a 40-year-old second-hand engine gave out and had to be replaced by another 40-year-old second-hand engine. I was aboard the smaller boat, and on arriving I learned that the local people were not overly impressed by the assertiveness of the French ship's crew as it stormed ashore looking for significant events to film.

In a cove not a stone's throw (as the saying goes) from the harbour a significant event was taking place. Several Canadians were quietly engaged in the underwater archaeological excavation of an 1800's shipwreck, the *Caroline*. Not a word of the wreck leaked out from the village to the *Calypso's* crew, and the ship sailed off without the story of the boat.

In time, the Canadians will make their own film of the *Caroline* (on a shoe-string budget, of course). Perhaps, in the meantime, if they are really lucky, they may interest one of our institutions in backing their project, and a film can be made in Canada by Canadians that will leave more of us better informed about our own country.

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