

Heroes and Roles in Climate Change

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Ambassadors of the Environment Transmedia Series
with Jean-Michel Cousteau and Ocean Futures Society**

Heroes

Most of us grow up with heroes of various sorts impacting our lives at a very early age. These champions may take the form of a special relative or public figure, but the impact of these mythical characters may last a lifetime. This was the case with me, in the person of Jacques-Yves Cousteau (1910-1997) (1), legendary scientist, environmentalist, inventor and filmmaker.

Captain Cousteau's influence on me as a young child paved the way for my own explorations, enjoyment, and involvement in the natural world around me. The lessons I learned while watching his televised travels around the world aboard his ship Calypso, continue to teach me half a century later. His principles have equally important impact on the planet's current climate change challenges.

One of the most compelling elements of Jacques-Yves Cousteau's work was his development of the tools allowing him to study the oceans, and archive his findings for future generations. He is credited with co-inventing the aqua-lung (2) scuba diving apparatus (1943), which quickly became commonplace for amateurs and professionals throughout the world. Scientists and consumers alike owe a huge debt to him for making all waterways approachable, fun and quantifiable.



Jacques Cousteau © Associated Press.

The lesson here is the miracle of invention to reach our goals, to engage our senses and bring together resources required, in a one-mindedness to succeed. Having heroes is no longer enough, we must be our own hero, and embrace the climate change emergency on an individual level. Each of us shares the planet, and together we likewise share the outcome of this challenge as individuals, families, and nations.

Roles

In my own case, the personal impact of watching Captain Cousteau's adventurous escapades broadcast during the 1950s and 60s, ignited in my personality a sense of

eagerly wanting to know what was high up in the treetops, under the surface of the water or around the next corner along an unfamiliar road. Curiosity about our world was indelibly tattooed on my very being.

Irony of ironies, as my own life story evolves into the current decade, it finds me working as a professional photojournalist for clients such as National Geographic Society, Smithsonian Institute, Royal Canadian Geographical Society, Jane Goodall Institute and many others. While on a magazine assignment on the island of Grand Cayman in the Caribbean, I came upon a program for children called Ambassadors of the Environment (3), which would carve a surprising role for me at the center of the climate change drama.

Ambassadors of the Environment

Designed by Jacques Cousteau's son Jean-Michel, together with his Ocean Futures Society in California, and in particular his Director of Science and Education, Dr. Richard Murphy (4), this comprehensive set of experiential games and activities was nothing short of life-changing for me. Before knowing about this curriculum, climate change and environment troubles in general, were matters being dealt with somewhere "out there" by the scientific community, not by me as an individual.

I did not feel that direct involvement in creating change was front-and-center in my life. My wife disagrees, and argues that my writing informs and advances the cause in a personal and professional manner. When I witnessed the

Ambassadors of the Environment process, it sparked something in me, and made me realize I could use my life's experience, and the resources at my disposal (just like Jacques Cousteau did when inventing the scuba gear), and forge ahead on a truly distinctive level, to contribute to correcting environmental problems like climate change.



AOTE Iguana Boy © Ocean Futures Society.

Back-story

As one of the original Canadian writers of the Sesame Street TV Show (5), as I toured the Cayman Island facility, my imagination ignited immediately. It did not take long for me to come up with the idea to "digitize" this children's curriculum. I saw it in my mind's eye being made available interactively to kids everywhere using the latest technologies as the delivery systems. I believe if real change is to occur across global barriers, children are the key. My goal is to help kids grow into conscious citizens for a peaceful world.

For my dream to become real, adults must provide the necessary information in "simplespeak," as well as easy-to-use techniques, weaving it together in a fun process for children to connect with the environment. Jean-Michel Cousteau and Ocean Futures Society have accomplished part of this, and the recognition of this fact is happening on

numerous global fronts. ABC Travel News placed the Ambassadors of the Environment in first position on their Top 10 Kids Resort Programs List for 2010. Currently, this experiential program is available in 10 locations worldwide: Brazil, Hawaii, French Polynesia (cruise ships), Greece, California (x3), France, Grand Cayman Island and Turks and Caicos.

My first baby step to success came when I decided to write a letter to Jean-Michel Cousteau, asking him for the rights to digitize his program, and deliver it to the world's children. By the time I finished my letter, I had a simple game plan to present to him. I would wait until I got back home to finesse the letter, talk to my wife and get her collaboration, and send off the proposal by email care of the Ocean Futures Society website.

Waiting Game

I am not a patient person, and possess limited ability to focus on a project for longer than perhaps three or four months at most. After that, unless there is a profound evolution in the work, I want to move on to something else. But with the Ambassadors of the Environment I found a new level of focus somewhere inside me.

It seemed to me this marvelous curriculum, if served to children in the best context, could spawn a worldwide environmental turnaround. In my mind's eye I was watching a hybrid media game-changer coming together, what one friend calls "Planet Earth Meets Sesame Street for the 21st Century."

It took one whole year of pursuing Jean-Michel Cousteau with my idea, aided by Dr. Richard Murphy, who responded immediately. Once Jean-Michel had read my proposal to digitize the Ambassadors of the Environment into a transmedia series of interactive content, he opened his heart and his organization to me.



AOTE Pontoon © Ocean Futures Society.

We signed an exclusive agreement giving me the rights to develop the Ambassadors of the Environment into a transmedia children's series of content, using live-action, digital puppetry, original animation, and global music, in a rollicking series engaging kids in environmental tasks, games and activities. One of the biggest elements of my dream is the interactivity of the series content. I want kids everywhere to be involved using their digital devices, telling us their stories, sharing local music, games and traditions from the culture and environment they call home.

Ultimate Partnership

Suddenly, I found myself as an ambassador of the environment, building a project game plan to present to the world. But first, I had to secure my wife's blessing, enthusiasm and

involvement. Any marriage is an ultimate partnership, and I needed Linda's magical creative touch, if the project was going to move forward. We talked long and hard about how to make our effort effective. I could see the wheels turning inside her, and feel her support of the idea.

Ultimately, we decided to be the change we wanted to see in our world, beginning at home. Our commitment was designed to invest two years of our time and our personal savings to allow work on the project full-time. There was no other way by which a project of this size and complexity could properly be presented and developed. I agreed to take several months to clear my freelancer's desk of commitments, and then I would dedicate every workday to the Ambassadors of the Environment Transmedia Series.

Linda, an accomplished painter, would sacrifice her art time for the planet on this project. She invested her time and energy by preparing and maintaining the household, personal relationships and acting as my editor and consultant, allowing this process to unfold. She came up with new ideas for environmental games the kids could play, fundraising concepts, methods by which her art would be auctioned to raise funding, and other innovative input. Without my wife's dedication, spirit, and kindness, I would not have been able to focus on presenting the project to three levels of government, top-tier media companies plus private and institutional investors around the world.

Action Stations

Once my desktop was cleared of obligations, I began to study the best way to unveil our unique concept. Obviously, our world is enthralled by the visual medium, so the decision was made to produce a short video presenting the series. But there was no money to do this, so how could we achieve such a modest goal?

I met with a young Montreal filmmaker, Sharif Mirshak, to present my concept verbally, and asked if he would work on my video production for free. He listened intently and agreed that he and his partner, Noé Sardat, would shoot, edit and produce my video as part of their tiny company ParaFilms (6). This would create the ultimate marketing tool, bringing together the creative elements of my "vision" into a brief 7-minute video. This document would hopefully ignite people's interest in the climate change issue and other environmental problems, and how to begin educating our children in ways to repair our collective relationship with nature.

I wrote the script, acted as the narrator on the video, received enormous help from Jean-Michel Cousteau's film editor, Jim Knowlton (7), and helped oversee appropriate other visuals to include. We had to borrow screen shots from websites, and since my eventual presentations would be a private process, we justified this decision for the greater good the series would create long-term. Our labor resulted in a seven-minute video everyone is proud of, and our eternal thanks continue to be directed to Sharif, Noé, and Jim for their generosity.

Simple Wisdom

Paramount to the core principles of the Ambassadors of the Environment is a set of goals ideally suited for grassroots climate changes and beyond:

- To give students a positive view of themselves.
- To develop knowledge and respect for the outdoors world.
- To give students life skills in communication, teamwork, responsibility and friendship building that will help them throughout life.
- To inspire youth to live more sustainably and take responsibility for their future.

Achieving a positive view inside a young person is a daunting task in any country, but critical if that child is to mature into a healthy, peaceful adult. By involvement in the experiential tasks of Ambassadors of the Environment, children see firsthand what respect is all about. The process for self-respect becomes less theoretical in the act of appreciating nature's wonders, and performing specific tasks as a team with others to achieve simple goals. Over time, the kids learn they too are an integral part of this magical environment, and by practicing inter-dependence with their fellow students, reflect the cooperation visible throughout the natural kingdom. Simple wisdom begins to germinate inside these younger citizens.



AOTE Sea Conk Girl © Ocean Futures Society.

Climate of Sustainability

It is my belief that we must teach children how to connect with the notion of sustainability to properly realize significant climate change progress. To accomplish this, the best place to begin may be inside the child's first environment – his or her own physical body. Ambassadors of the Environment makes this task easier by providing concrete examples of the systems and processes we see at work in nature and inside our bodies everyday. Here are just a few examples:

- EVERYTHING RUNS ON ENERGY: stars, cities, machines and people (skin, bones, muscles and organs)
- THERE IS NO WASTE IN NATURE: nature recycles everything (so do our bodies)
- BIODIVERSITY IS ESSENTIAL: each species has an important job (each part of the body too)
- EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED: all species depend on others (interdependency of body/mind/spirit)

Imagine children around the world absorbing the lessons of nature at a very young age, and holding their parents, families and communities accountable. This is not such a far-fetched notion. Never before has the possibility of communicating with large numbers of young people been so real. Given the peaceful, constructive input from programs like

Ambassadors of the Environment will surely reap untold benefits long into the future for our troubled planet.

Solutions

The IIPT's 2011 Lusaka Declaration on Sustainable Tourism Development, Climate Change and Peace articulates numerous goals for the travel and tourism industry worldwide to achieve without delay. From supporting the Davos Declaration – Responding to Global Challenges, to developing “Green Growth” transformations, waste management systems, embracing the wisdom, knowledge and values of aboriginal peoples, appreciating we are all custodians of one common home – planet Earth, and to calling on all travelers to be ambassadors of peace.

The remarkable synergy of the Lusaka Declaration and the Ambassadors of the Environment curriculum is a celebration of solutions. Former Vice President of the United States, Al Gore, proved like-minded environmentalists are able to connect using the latest technologies, when he attracted more than 8.6 million website “views” from people around the world in only 24 hours of his recent Climate Reality Project (8).

Finale

From my point of view, all the necessary components are in place to successfully address the climate change problem, as well as many other environmental challenges:

- The list of modern environmental heroes who are ready, willing and able to lead the climate change turnaround grows daily.
- The common-sense wisdom of the elders can be immediately shared via state-of-the-art technology tools accessible on all continents.
- Our roles are precisely articulated in the Ambassadors of the Environment programs at work now with community and tourism partners worldwide.

Our fragile Mother Earth needs a simple decision from each of us, on a very personal level, for her future to be a peaceful, healthy one. I invite you to take some time in a quiet, private place, like I did two years ago in the aftermath of witnessing the Ambassadors of the Environment program firsthand, to examine your own relationship with the planet. It is not a complicated issue, rather a straightforward personal decision-making act. But this sacred reflection will be heard and felt for generations on all continents, and especially on the path you walk from here forwards.

In the forward to the 2011 book *Canada's National Parks*, CEO of Parks Canada (9), Mr. Alan Latourelle writes: “Since the first humans evolved on this planet we have managed to inhabit practically every corner of the globe. In so doing we have, through experimentation and best efforts, developed an incredible diversity of cultures adapted to various climates, landscapes, and other ecological challenges that the natural world has presented to us. To understand a culture one must examine the land that shaped it. To understand the Aboriginal peoples of Canada and the many who subsequently settled and adapted here, one needs to understand Canada's landscape – its climate, forests, plants, wildlife, and spiritual places.”

If we cut out the word “Canada” this text could apply to all nations, continents and peoples. Our recipe for success in dealing with climate change or any of our environmental challenges is set. We must only decide to activate it as soon as possible. I am confident we will be able to accomplish this together in peace.

FOOTNOTES

- (1) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Cousteau.
- (2) www.cousteau.org/technology/aqua-lung.
- (3) www.oceanfutures.org/learning/ambassadors-environment.
- (4) <http://www.rcmurph.com>.
- (5) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sesame_Street.
- (6) <http://vimeo.com/parafilms/albums>.
- (7) www.jimknowlton.com.
- (8) <http://climaterealityproject.org>.
- (9) <http://www.pc.gc.ca>.