



The Human, the Orchid and the Octopus: Exploring and Conserving Our Natural World

Jacques-Yves Cousteau, Susan Schiefelbein

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Part adventure story, part manifesto, the legendary ocean explorer's passionate plea for sustaining life on earth.

Explorer, diving pioneer, filmmaker, inventor, and activist, Jacques Cousteau was blessed from his childhood with boundless curiosity about the natural world. As the leader of fascinating, often dangerous expeditions all over the planet, he discovered firsthand the complexity and beauty of life on earth and undersea--and watched the toll taken by human activity in the twentieth century.

In this magnificent last book, finally available for the first time in the United States, Cousteau describes his deeply informed philosophy about protecting our world for future generations. Weaving gripping stories of his adventures throughout, he and coauthor Susan Schiefelbein address the risks we take with human health, the overfishing and sacking of the world's oceans, the hazards of nuclear proliferation, and the environmental responsibility of scientists, politicians, and people of faith. Cousteau's lyrical, passionate call for action to protect our earth and seas and their myriad life forms is even more relevant today than when this book was completed in 1996. Written over the last ten years of his life with frequent collaborator Schiefelbein, who also introduces the text and provides an update on environmental developments in the decade since Cousteau's death, this prescient, clear-sighted book is a remarkable testament to the life and work of one of our greatest modern adventurers.

The Human, the Orchid and the Octopus: Exploring and Conserving Our Natural World Details

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Andy says

This was a good book but I think the manifesto part about pollution, etc. was too long and will be preaching to the choir for most readers of a book by Cousteau. The parts about Cousteau's life and the way he thought about things were very interesting.

Michael Cummings says

A little dated in parts, this was my first foray into a Jacques Cousteau book. For me, Cousteau shined best in this book when recounting his own past. If I can find an autobiography by the man I'd love to read it - his life anecdotes read like a modern day Verne character. Active in WW2, then an explorer of the deeps and all the wonders therein.

Kenneth says

Instead of "Diver Down" this is Diver Up! This was a marvelous audio book to listen to at summers end. Not just a visit to my past, recalling sitting on the living room floor watching the wonderful TV documentaries that used to run in prime time on network TV in America! (Imagine that today!), the marvelous, "The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau.". Cousteau won many awards in his lifetime, but I still feel that he was highly underrated when I walk away from listening to his book. The man was a genius, a visionary. This book was written shortly before his death in 1997. We have had 21 years since his death to consider the clear warnings that he gave us concerning our environment and the worsening conditions of the seas. What have we seen develop? Have we listened?

He develops chapters that read like white papers on the nuclear power industry, nuclear arms proliferation, undersea drilling, the fishing industry, and even a primer for executive management in risk management.

Though he was not particularly a religious man, Cousteau believed that the teachings of the different major religions provide valuable ideals and thoughts to protect the environment. In a Chapter entitled "The Holy Scriptures and The Environment" in the posthumous work The Human, the Orchid, and the Octopus, he is quoted as stating that "The glory of nature provides evidence that God exists"

For the scientist and environmentalist, or just the plain lover of nature, I highly recommend this book.

Sean Wylie says

Oh I wanted to like this book SO MUCH. Jacques Cousteau was an extraordinary person. He invented modern scuba diving (my favorite past time), he defined underwater exploration, created the first underwater cameras thus bringing the Ocean onto the TV screens of the world, and it would be hard to find someone else who has done more for the environmental movement.

I came into the book expecting a posthumous retelling of his many ocean adventures, I was disappointed.

While there were occasional references to the daring life he led in the name of exploration, the majority of the book was an environmental manifesto. That is not necessarily a bad thing, and certainly in-line with the core of his life, just not what I was expecting and not done particularly well. This book was published years after his death and was written primarily by Susan Schiefelbein. As I find with most books with an environmental focus, the book becomes a blame-game rather than a call-to-action. The conclusion of most chapters went like this "Look at this awful thing you did to hurt the planet, even though Jacques told you it would be bad!". While perhaps correct, it is weak story telling with little hope of persuading anyone to do anything.

It had a vibe of hopelessness that is all to common among many environmentalists. "Save the Planet"? What nonsense, the planet will be just fine. It is saving the human species from causing our own extinction that should be the rallying cry for the environmental movement.

Lauren says

Stupendously depressing

Chris says

Simultaneously depressing and important, Cousteau's book paints a picture of mankind's clumsy impact not just on the waters he explored, but the globe and its people.

Erica Leigh says

I came across this book on the bargain shelf and picked it up because I have fond memories of watching The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau as a child and thought it would be interesting to read more about him. Though not the autobiography I was expecting, I found the book fascinating. It is part history, part nature conservancy, part political – it is at times prophetic (fifteen years ago Cousteau projected a catastrophic nuclear event due to plants in Japan being built on fault lines) and at times terrifying (his description of the destruction of sea life he has witnessed over the years not to mention the evidence he provides regarding radioactive waste and nuclear stockpiling). But through it all, there is a vein of hope, of respect, and most certainly a pleading to the rest of us to take up where he left off to protect our natural world.

One of my favorite quotes from the book came toward the end - "For most of his existence, Homo Sapiens had to struggle against nature to survive. A creature with almost no defensive or offensive weapons, the human had access to little more power than he could cajole from a mule. Suddenly, stumbling upon the secret of fossil fuel, he found himself the unexpected ruler of the planet. He has not yet mastered his supremacy. He does not understand that his survival now depends not on the conquest of nature, but on the protection of nature. Man has ascended to his level of incompetence."

I have already recommended reading The Human, the Orchid and the Octopus to several family members and friends, and will continue to do so – thoughtfully written, with fascinating stories and statistics, it is an excellent book and I can only hope there are more Jacques Cousteau's in the world to save us from

ourselves.

Karen Mead says

Cousteau led a fascinating life, thus this is a fascinating book. I was expecting it to be all about his underwater dives, but there's actually a wealth of material here on many different subjects. Some of it deals with Cousteau's political life out of the water, as perhaps the most famous voice for ocean conservation, but it was all interesting (despite the occasional lack of sharks.)

My only criticism is that the section towards the end about the evils of nuclear waste seems to come a bit out of nowhere. I understand that nuclear waste effects the whole environment, and thus the oceans, but somehow it doesn't seem to quite gel with the rest of the book. It's like, after regaling you with tales from his fascinating life for 90% of the book, Cousteau then says, "By the way, have I mentioned how much I hate nuclear energy? I hate nuclear energy!" I don't even necessarily disagree with him (need to learn more personally), but it did give me pause here.

Still, highly recommended. Cousteau's life was inspiring, and I think many people's lives would be improved by knowing more about him.

Christine Crawford says

Cousteau's message about conservation is interesting and important, but this book goes on a little too long. He is a really interesting guy who led an amazing life and a lot of the stories in this book are eye-opening (I now feel guilty for eating fish and am seriously concerned about a nuclear disaster), but he could have gotten his points across a lot more quickly.

Scott Taylor says

Along with Marlin Perkins, Jacques Cousteau was one of the guys to spark my interest in the natural environment when I was a kid. So I cut him a little slack for this overly preachy book.

It seems to be Cousteau's answer to the question "what would you like your epitaph to read?" In that sense, it meets expectations - the book provides insight into the man as well as his message - think long-term and think of conservation of resources rather than short term gain. It is a good message, consistent with my own belief that we all need to be good stewards of the planet.

There are also several thought-provoking segments where Cousteau discusses philosophy, applied science versus pure science, religion, and the notion of risk assessment. Those parts of the book were great. But the rest...a little tedious with the moralizing and intensity.

Thanks for reading.

David says

The book start out promisingly, like a memoir, with tales from Cousteau's fascinating life. Most of the tales are about his close brushes with death. Then the book changes course, and goes into the predations of humans on our environment. Very preachy. No positive approaches to saving the environment. A long rant against nuclear energy, but no mention of what should replace it. Toward the end of the book is a segue into philosophy. I expected better.

Michael Treadway says

Whether it's from *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* or the casual narration at the beginning of an episode of *Spongebob Squarepants*, most of what I know about Jacques Cousteau is just pastiche. He's been little more to me than a name and an affected French accent.

Yet, of all the things I've heard about the man, of all the things he's reported to have done for the conservation, exploration, and appreciation of the natural world, I figured it was worth checking out a book by the man.

This book is broken down into chapters that read like essays on different topics that mattered to Cousteau. He talks about his time as a spy during WWII, his documentaries, the ocean, and all about how much impact we humans have had on everything. There's even a chapter that discusses religion and environmentalism in a very fair and objective way. Biography, science, natural history, experience, and opinion blend here seamlessly.

Very interesting, very fascinating, and a relatively fast read.

Bobby says

Cousteau's last book (I believe) is also an excellent introduction to his beliefs and views when it comes to things like protecting the oceans, the dangers of nuclear power, and issue of politics versus science when it comes to making public policy. Although some may find this a bit too dry, I enjoyed Cousteau's sardonic but intelligent commentary--very well supported by facts and numbers--exposing the hypocrisy and shortsightedness of politicians. He also peppers his intellectual analysis with warm, humanistic anecdotes from his travels that kept the book from being too tedious or preachy. Should be mandatory reading for public policy makers!

Dave Forcucci says

This book is not sugar coated with adventures but instead references Jacques adventures in relation to lessons

he learned through his life. You have to read between the lines of his diatribes of environmental destruction by humans on the sea and earth. Examples include his huge effort to reduce risk to his men because of a young diver who perished on a solo dive early in Jacques' career. Recently watching his series "The undersea world of Jacques Cousteau" he had his engineers on board Calypso take apart the entire mini-subs and put them back together to make sure everything was working properly. This was done over a week onboard Calypso! I was amazed that he (or his engineers) took such pains to meticulously check out the subs before sending his men down in them. After reading "The Human, the Orchid and the Octopus" I understand why he went to such lengths. He did not consider it a liability to protect his men from risk but a privilege to keep them safe.

Another example is when Calypso destroyed an old growth stand of black coral with her anchor. From then on he made sure that Calypso always dropped her anchor in avoidance of sensitive habitat.

Rather than fighting Atomic proliferation he became involved with the IAEA and was on the commission.

He weaves his experiences into the Earth's environmental challenges which is very learned.

Jacques was an amazing guy and references his knowledge of science, religion, including the Quran, and politics to bring the Earth's environment into perspective.

Mark Victor Young says

This fascinating collection of anecdotes from the life of an amazing man takes a somber turn, as Cousteau first looks back on his life and then looks ahead to a dark future. He talks about the change he has seen in the world's oceans in the last 50 years and what's to come. He looks back on his years of opposition to nuclear energy and weaponry and all the mistakes that have been made which will be around to haunt us for 1000 years. And lastly he contemplates climate change and how that will affect the planet.

But ultimately, this scientist and explorer turns his mind to the possibility that science will provide an out for us and solve all our problems. This leads him to an imagined utopia of science-led perfection. Wishful thinking, I would argue, but you can't fault an old man (the book was written a year before he died and acts as his final memoirs) his hope for the future.
