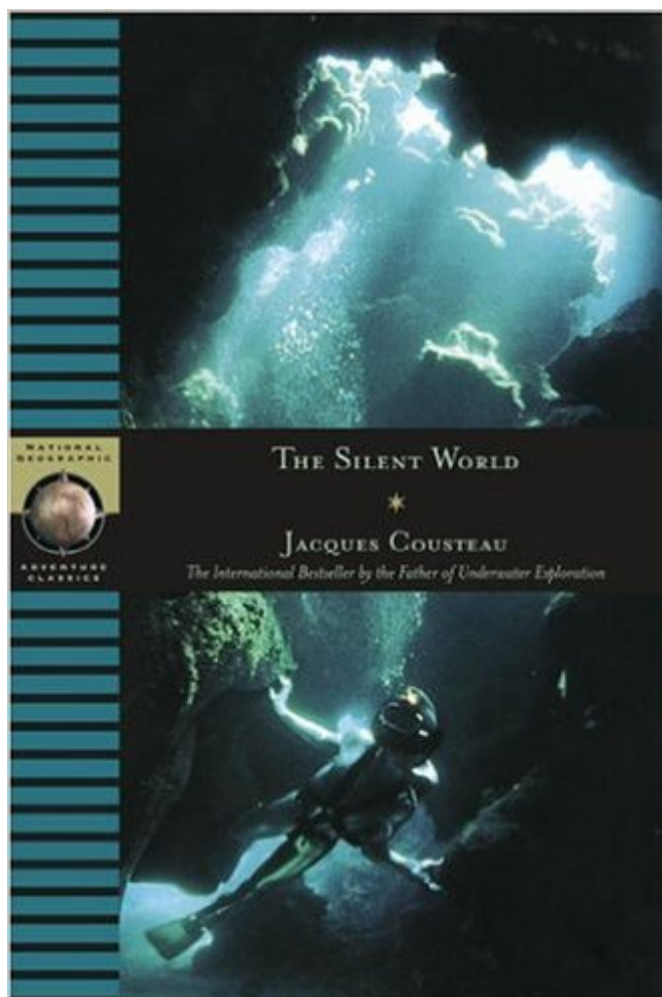


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# Silent World (National Geographic Adventure Classics)



## Synopsis

Before becoming the man who introduced us to the wonders of the sea through his beloved television series, Jacques Cousteau was better known as an engineer and the inventor of scuba. He chronicled his early days of underwater adventure in *The Silent World*—a memoir that was an instant, international bestseller upon its publication in 1954. Now, National Geographic presents a 50th anniversary edition of this remarkable book, allowing readers to once again travel under the sea with Cousteau during the turbulent days of World War II.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

What can be said about Jacques Cousteau and his groundbreaking book that hasn't been said a thousand times? He is undoubtedly the defining figure of modern scuba diving, his books, films, and documentaries known to millions or billions. Even the name of his ship, the *Calypso*, is known the world over. It's a small volume, this book, just 160 pages, yet it's absolutely mandatory reading for anyone interested in what Cousteau termed "the silent world" under the surface of the water that covers 71% of our planet. *The Silent World* is the bible of modern scuba diving. Jacques Cousteau himself died in 1997 at the age of 87, but the legacy of his pioneering work with diving and diving physiology lives on. It is all well documented and disseminated worldwide, thanks to this French explorer's unique combination of instinctive understanding of the world under the surface and his equally unique knack of spellbinding the world with his words and images. A total master of public relations and getting the word out, Cousteau managed to grab attention and media coverage

wherever he went. Critics went so far as suggesting his media talents exceeded his actual contributions to understanding the seas. At first it's hard to figure out why this slim volume became such a success. It's not a textbook, it doesn't cover the history of diving or even much of Cousteau's own research, and it's not an adventure book. Though Cousteau was French, he wrote *The Silent World* in English as he had attended American schools in his youth, widely traveled the US, and, of course, extensively lectured in his enchanting French-accented English. Yet, *The Silent World* clearly reveals its author's non-English origin and decidedly "non-English" thinking. The writing, while precise, often suggests that Cousteau frequently described a word or concept that existed in his native French, but did not directly translate into English. As a result, the writing at times seems a bit flowery and, well, foreign, and you need to read a sentence or paragraph two or three times to figure out what it actually means. Cousteau's liberal use of metaphors, artistic nuances, poetic concepts and words that have since fallen out of current language only serve to make *The Silent World* even more unusual of a literary treat. Anyone looking for technical explanations, precise history, a logical flow of events, or anything one might expect from a world-famous documentary maker and researcher will not find it in this book. *The Silent World* is a totally unique, very compressed tale flowing from Cousteau's mind. Read half a chapter and you know the man; he's a unique combination of inspired philosophical observer and gifted researcher with uncanny intuition. While others conducted their research methodically and ploddingly, Cousteau always just seemed to know what to expect, how to behave, and what to seek and avoid to make it all seem easy. He and his close associates and friends Phillipe Tailliez and Frederic Dumas used their "aqualung" to experiment liberally in sort of a "Hmmm.... this is probably what will happen, let's go check it out!" approach. Using this, Cousteau describes the difference between "helmet divers" and the newly liberated users of their "aqualung" -- what we now know as air tanks and regulators. The book casually touches on all the principles of diving physics and physiology, the stuff we learn in our PADI and NAUI classes. He describes sea life, how it reacts, where it lives, how it behaves, and what is dangerous and what is not. They see just how deep they can go. They check how colors change. What nitrogen does and why we need recompression chambers. He offers his views on treasure hunting (not worth it; if you find real treasure authorities and hordes of lawyers will soon apprehend it). He reports on atrocities he witnessed underwater, like the needless destruction of corals and cruel killing of fish. He debunks myths of sea monsters, seeks answers to geological phenomena such as the Fountain of Vaucluse near Avignon, one that almost cost him and Dumas their lives in a pioneering effort at extreme cave diving. He describes what fish do and how they react. And sea mammals and other sea critters. Sharks remain an enigma to Cousteau as his

conclusion is that you simply cannot understand or predict them. So *The Silent World* relates, in 14 fascinating self-contained chapters, pretty much everything we know about diving today, 60 years after Cousteau began researching as a "manfish," all the principles we know, and it's all neatly and attractively presented in tales that always mix research with adventure. Cousteau never preaches or lectures. He just explores, pushes, interprets, and reports. Maybe Captain Jacques-Yves Cousteau was a showman as much as a researcher. If so, good for him as otherwise we may never have had the opportunity to learn from him and enjoy his remarkable insights. -- C. H. Blickenstorfer, [scubadiverinfo.com](http://scubadiverinfo.com)

I first read this book when I was about 15. I begged my mother to sign me up for a SCUBA class shortly after and I am still diving 25 years later. I have re-read it about 3 times since then and still keep a copy on my shelf. There is still something very captivating about the early days of diving and Cousteau's descriptions of the silent world. The explorers in his book indulged in a pioneering activity under the nose of the occupying Nazi regime and set in motion the evolution of underwater adventure that millions enjoy today. *The Silent World* is easy and enjoyable to read. Most of the photographs are hard to see compared with the vast amount of underwater shots available today. However, when you consider the time period these photos were taken combined with the daring of these early pioneers, you can't help but be impressed. This book produced an enjoyable influence on my life and I am sure it will on anyone willing to learn about the early history of underwater exploration.

If you grew up watching the *Undersea World* of Jacques Cousteau one night a week, you must read this book by Mr. Cousteau. I read the first chapter of this delightful little book in a diving collection and was instantly drawn to Cousteau's narrating style. Modest and touched with humor, he describes the creation of the aqualung (scuba) and his early exploits with it. Early photos of underwater creatures are amazing. My copy is from the late 1950s and I hold it carefully. It is a physical and figurative jewel to me.

This gripping tale of the early period of under water exploration begins in late WW II and is set off the coast in the south of France and Mediterranean Sea. Most clearly it is not a NOVEL (see previous review). In it you will find Jacques' characteristic outlook in the germination stages. Especially interesting to observe is the beginnings of environmental concerns in his misc. comments about man's impact on the health of the Mediterranean Sea. There are accounts of the effects of

Coral dredging and drag netting clearing documenting the destructiveness of these techniques coupled with descriptions of his own crew on his aboard the French Naval vessel he commanded harpooning of sea mammals for questionable "scientific" experiments. All in all it is a good read for individuals interested in the history of exploration of new worlds by this sensitive innovative explorer. Not to be missed are the numerous accounts of early ship wreck exploration. My copy was published in 1953 and includes some of the earliest published color underwater shots. Highly recommended.

It was interesting and valuable to read this book both for its historical value as well for the scientific knowledge from such a keen observer and student of the ocean. It's amazing how much of the knowledge and science Cousteau presented in this 1950's book is still valid today. He discusses marine life behavior, the physics of light and physiology among other topics. The reason I rated it 4 rather than 5 stars is his attitude towards marine life at that time was abominable. True, our view of sea life has changed and I'm judging him by a different standard, still this was a very intelligent man and it's clear he was aware of his cruelty. It's ironic that he feared the large creatures but in fact he and his team were the most dangerous beings in the ocean. He talks about using explosive harpoons, capturing sea mammals to use as displays and pets, trapping octopuses, and using dynamite on fish. Some of this was done for the purpose of making "interesting" underwater films. Of course the book was written over 60 years ago by a pioneer with a different mentality and societal attitudes than today, and I understand his behavior towards marine animals changed later in life.

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