

See *for Yourself*
by Chan Ka-yan

On a dive in the Philippines, Charles Frew comes face-to-face with a six-metre whale shark. In the Briton's eyes, the massive fish is simply another magnificent marine creature and it is having fun with him. He is not frightened by its size; rather he is amazed by it. Frew, carrying a heavy light on his back, adroitly picks up his camera and captures the image of the awe-inspiring shark. This is no casual snap; taking underwater pictures is not just a hobby, it is the way he makes his living.

"I madly love underwater and the fish, I like to explore and study the underwater environment," he says.

Frew, who is in his 30s, is a full-time professional ocean photographer who has been taking underwater photos for 10 to 12 years. He was inspired to be an ocean photographer when his parents

bought him a tiny camera and then took him to the Philippines to take underwater pictures. His love of marine life led him to obtain a master's degree in marine resource development and protection and, eventually, to develop a career in underwater photography.

He sells his work to different media and sometimes posts his photos on the social networking site Facebook and his personal homepage to attract potential buyers. The prices vary according to the prominence of the media. "Maybe HK\$2,000 per photo, it depends. If it is used internationally, it is higher; if it is used locally, you get less," he explains.

Frew says ocean photography is not a business with a fast turnover where you can earn a great deal in a short period of time. It usually takes him three to four weeks of research, travelling, and several dives before getting the desired shot. It can be very time-consuming because he has to wait for both the subject and good weather.

A blue sky and bright sunshine are crucial for taking underwater photos because it is darker in the sea. But the targets do not always appear on sunny days. "It is always about your luck," says Frew. He recalls an experience he had of waiting for more than an hour underwater for his target to appear, and of diving several times to get a shot. Still, he considers himself a lucky



Paul Hilton believes that good understanding of the ocean is the key to ocean photographers.

person who can always get good photos of marine animals.

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Frew's favourite place is the Pacific island of Palau. It is an excellent place for photographing sharks because it is the only place that has banned shark fishing outright. He admires countries that encourage conservation and he hopes every country can start protecting the ocean.

Frew has expanded his business to underwater filming as well as still photography. He documents the lives of marine creatures and sends the storyboards to different international channels such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Discovery Channel to look for potential buyers. Footage of about five to 10 minutes fetches HK\$400 to HK\$1,200



Charles Frew highlights the importance of luck for ocean photography.



COURTESY OF CHARLES FREW

Frew is taking a close-up shot for a whale shark.



COURTESY OF PAUL HILTON



COURTESY OF DENNY WONG

per second, which is a considerable amount of money to Frew.

Those figures may make the business sound profitable, but the costs are high and include boat hire, flights

to the destinations and buying different kinds of equipment.

Denny Wong Chun-bon, a veteran local underwater photography instructor, agrees that it is costly to take photos underwater.

Wong says everyone can be an ocean photographer. He runs a company organising diving tours and underwater photography courses. Wong's course is in two parts: theory and field trip. The theory section costs HK\$1,500 for three two-hour lessons. On the practical side, it costs HK\$400

for a local field trip and HK\$4,000 for an overseas field trip, including air tickets and accommodation.

“We were so close and I realised how gentle they were. That was a life-changing experience.”

There are about 10 students in each class but it is rare to find a youngster on the course. “Usually my students are about 30 to 40 years old with stable jobs. It may be because the course and the equipment are expensive,” he says. According to Wong, a complete set of gear costs about HK\$20,000. It includes a camera, protective lens housing, lighting, diving suit and diving



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Denny Wong organises underwater photography courses for local people.

equipment etc.

He says that while it is unlikely that a Hong Kong person would choose to be a full-time ocean photographer because it is hard to make a stable income from selling photos, the colourful ocean deserves to be captured.

Another British photographer, Paul Hilton has persisted with ocean photography despite the unstable income. He supplements his ocean photography with other photography jobs such as general features, news work and corporate and environmental assignments. But ocean photography remains his major source of income and the largest part of his work.

Hilton says being an ocean photographer is a wonderful way to make a living. “You can have a very personal experience when you are out in the field. It’s a great way to spend your life.”

His work is published in many leading newspaper and magazines such as *The New York Times* and *National Geographic*. He wants others to notice and understand the beauty of the ocean and pay attention to ocean protection.



COURTESY OF DENNY WONG

It is not an easy calling; capturing marine creatures requires great effort and extensive preparation.


Before diving, photographers have to research the places they are planning to dive in. Then they have to check what kinds of creatures can be found and decide what equipment is needed. A dive computer is sometimes needed to work out how deep the water is and how long the diver can stay underwater.

Hilton says a good understanding of the ocean is key for ocean photographers. They have to know how the tides work, how to read the waves in different ways and how to determine whether there is a current.

Furthermore, Hilton always tries to have some knowledge of the behaviour of the creatures and their habitat. He needs to understand, for example, when and where the animals eat and when they are calm. “But it doesn’t mean you will be successful,” he chuckles.

He stresses that an ocean photographer has to be really passionate about the ocean. When ocean photographers are underwater, they should be calm and they have to multitask since they are diving, taking the picture and adjusting the light at

the same time when the target appears. Once the target leaves, there may not be another chance. It is a bonus to be physically fit as ocean photographers have to carry equipment weighing 30 to 40 kg.

They also have to have strong nerves. Hilton recalls how, three years ago, a beautiful whale swam calmly next to him in the sea off Tonga, an archipelago in the South Pacific Ocean. This whale, which was 10 times larger than Hilton, played happily and gently with the photographer. It seemed they had broken the boundary between species and become friends at that moment. “It was absolutely amazing to be with this beautiful creature, we were so close and I realised how gentle they were. That was a life-changing experience. It’s very special to me!” Hilton exclaims. And this unforgettable moment was then transformed into a shot. 



COURTESY OF DENNY WONG



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