

Ocean's eleventh hour

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The Last Ocean is one of those projects that you can never plan – it just happens and, truth is, it's probably best that way. It's a bit like when you first have kids – if you realised the work involved you would think twice about going there. I have four children and *The Last Ocean* feels like my fifth.

This latest addition is a self-funded feature documentary that came into being three years ago when Colorado photographer **John Weller** turned up on my doorstep in Christchurch.

At the time I was a freelance cameraman/producer. Recent projects included a *Giant Squid* documentary for **Discovery Channel**, shooting a

TVNZ doco series with **Pete Elliot** called *Explorers* and, when John arrived, I was part way through my first series of *Hunger for the Wild* for TVNZ.

I hadn't met John before – he found me through word of mouth and he was on a mission. He had recently read a scientific paper written by US Antarctic ecologist **David Ainley**, titled *Acquiring a Base Datum of Normality for a Marine Ecosystem – the Ross Sea Antarctic*. Never destined for the best-seller list, it was however a compelling read. In essence it told of how the Ross Sea is the last intact ocean ecosystem on Earth and, as such, a laboratory that provides vital information about the working of all marine ecosystems – but the natural balance of the ecosystem was now under threat from commercial fishing.

That night John invited me to join him on a trip to the Ross Sea to film for a project called *The Last Ocean*. It wasn't a paying job and it was to take me away from my family for four weeks over Christmas. I

seriously considered saying “no” and probably would have if I hadn't been to the Ross Sea before. Nowhere have I seen such untouched and outstanding beauty as there – it truly is one of the world's great natural treasures, not just for its stunning environment and amazing wildlife but for the sum of those parts. The ecosystem has a natural order that has evolved without major human interference over thousands and thousands of years. Ancient in its structure, all of the top predators are still intact and govern the shape of the food web below.

So, excited by the prospect of visiting this spectacular part of the world once more, I said “yes” and spent four wonderful weeks with John filming and photographing the Ross Sea ecosystem in action. That was the birth of this documentary and I have been working on *The Last Ocean* with Dave Ainley and John Weller ever since.

It is a complex tale and, on returning to New Zealand, the

story quickly moved from wildlife and nature to business and politics as I tried to understand why fishing was allowed in this most pristine place. Driving me were the values of the project and the respect for this great gift of nature that is “the last ocean”.

The fact that it is our country – clean, green New Zealand – that created this commercial fishery in the Ross Sea should make this an issue of special interest for New Zealanders. Back in 1996 the Government encouraged a major New Zealand fishing company to check out the Ross Sea; a boat was duly sent south to throw its hooks over the side and test the waters. Scientists, who for years needed environmental impact reports to take a pee, now had to watch boats taking 50 year-old fish from this precious ecosystem. Dave Ainley was one of those scientists and his paper was his response.

I explored how and why that New Zealand boat was allowed to go there and, even though I'm not a political

animal, I was finding the politics of Antarctica fascinating.

Antarctica is the only continent in the world without a native human population. It has no sovereignty, no nation to give it a voice or to protect it. Instead, it has the Antarctic Treaty System, providing governance over the region.

Put into force 50 years ago, the Treaty was a wonderful and, at the time, unprecedented agreement binding Antarctic nations in a cooperative spirit of peace and science.

But for some reason when they drew up the Treaty they applied it to the land and left out the waters, including the Ross Sea. As a result, the waters around Antarctica became the high seas, part of the global commons. Twenty-odd years after the Antarctic Treaty, another agreement was signed to protect the waters. Administered by the **Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources** (CCAMLR), its convention allowed for rational use of resource.

It is this clause that allowed the New Zealand fishing company to explore the Ross Sea fishery. But once word got out, the floodgates opened. That one boat from New Zealand in 1996 quickly grew to near-on 20 from a dozen different nations, taking up to 3000 tonnes of Antarctic toothfish from the ecosystem each year. After thousands upon thousands of years, the fishing industry had finally found its way to the last intact ecosystem on earth and was treating it like every other fishing ground on the planet.

Worldwide, marine ecosystems are being pushed to the brink of collapse. There are countless examples of the detrimental effects of taking a top predator from an ecosystem and here we were doing it to the last ocean.

In my previous life I spent nearly 10 years working in the primary sector as a farmer, fencer, and shearer, and two seasons on a commercial fishing boat. I am familiar with the economic pressures the industries face but having seen both sides of the fence I firmly believe this is one

place we shouldn't be fishing.

As the last intact ocean ecosystem on earth, the value of the Ross Sea ecosystem to humanity is huge. This wonderful natural asset has taken all preceding history to evolve and yet we treat it like a larder, destroying this incredible treasure for financial gain and to satisfy the palates of a wealthy few. We are stealing from the natural inheritance of our children.

It's fair to say that this story turned out to be far bigger than I imagined. I've ended up travelling the world talking to Antarctic scientists, I've been to CCAMLR in Hobart, fish markets in New York, and a Ross Sea Scientific Symposium in Washington. I've spoken to politicians, fishermen, campaigners, and, of course, I've been to the place where it all began, the Ross Sea.

It's been an exhilarating, frightening, frustrating, and engrossing ride that's taken me well out of my comfort zone. If I had a dollar for

Ecosystem at risk: Documentary *The Last Ocean* examines the threat that human activity poses to Antarctica's Ross Sea, the most pristine ocean ecosystem that remains on Earth. Pictured are (far left) a Weddell seal, the southern most-dwelling mammal in the world, and (left) an Adelie penguin.