

A Kiwi documentary aims to lift awareness of the threats facing Antarctica's Ross Sea. *The Last Ocean's* Peter Young talks to **James Croot.**

As you would expect, a film called *The Last Ocean* presents many challenges for a film-maker.

But wildlife and the extremes of Antarctica's Ross Sea were not what daunted Christchurch film-maker Peter Young – it was entering the cauldron of politics.

"Going into these political situations and being a total novice, I found myself challenged in so many ways.

"But then I realised, these people are just people and what they are saying isn't rocket science – just humans operating on a very basic level – trading and politicking."

Despite working for National Geographic, Discovery, BBC and Television New Zealand on more than 100 documentaries around the world, Young says this was a much of a journey for him as it will be for the audience.

"I had no idea of where it would take me when I started."

Aware of what a special place the

Ross Sea is from the summer he spent as a dishwasher at the United States' Antarctic base at McMurdo Sound, he was more than intrigued when friend Colorado photographer John Weller turned up on his doorstep with an idea.

"He told me about David Ainley's scientific paper, which showed how the introduction of commercial fishing to the area in 1986 was threatening the natural balance of the Ross Sea's ecosystem.

"He argued that this 'living laboratory' was one of the last opportunities to understand how a completely healthy marine ecosystem functions."

Weller had two tickets on a Russian tourist ship heading for the Ross Sea, an offer Young couldn't refuse, "even though it was going to take me away from the family for four weeks".

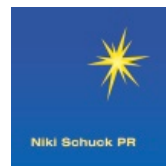
"You don't give up an opportunity to go there. It really is an amazing part of the world."

Despite capturing a lot of footage of the magnificent Antarctic environment, Young wasn't completely committed to the project until he dug deeper, talking to the fisherman and the politicians.

"The more I understood, the more I knew it was incredibly wrong to be down there, fishing in these areas.

"When I found myself flying to Hobart, to the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources [CCAMLR], to see where decisions about the Ross Sea are made, I realised I had to make a documentary."





△ Peter Young films among the fragile underwater ecosystem in Antarctica's Ross Sea.

Photo: ROB ROBBINS



'Once you destroy the Ross Sea, you can't rebuild it.'

PETER YOUNG



Young knew he had to address New Zealand's part in creating the current situation. It was Kiwi companies who first came up with a proposal to fish for antarctic toothfish (known as Chilean sea bass in world fish markets), which CCAMLR approved, initially for a five-year "exploratory" period. Somehow, that got extended to all 25 of CCAMLR's nations and now each races to fill their quota during the short summer season.

You won't see Chilean sea bass in many Kiwi restaurants or fish markets, says Young. That's not because of any environmental consciousness, but rather because 98 per cent of our catch ends up in North America. "I think it would be too expensive for the local market."

Young says it's important for people to realise that the debate isn't about the sustainability of the fishery. "It's that we're destroying the last pristine place" and New Zealand needs to take a stand.

"It is hard to detect and explain changes in an eco-system where it's all happening underwater. However, every other ocean on Earth has shown us that if you take the top predator out, it is going to have far-reaching, major effects on ecosystem below.

"It is so hypocritical for us to be down there saying other countries shouldn't be whaling when we are sending our fishing fleets to plunder it for toothfish.

"Our clean, green image is fast becoming a bit of folklore. We've traded on it for a good 20 years since we stood up to the rest of the world over nuclear weapons. We won a whole lot of respect internationally then, and that's exactly what we have to do now in the Ross Sea – take a stand internationally and go against the forces of capitalism and the global economy and say, 'No – it's too far'."

With the Ross Sea afforded a great

deal of protection already, this isn't some "pie-in-the-sky" idea to stop fishing there.

"There is only one little clause that has allowed this to take place. There is a way forward. It just needs a bit of political will, and it's going to take a country like ours to lead the way when CCAMLR next meets in October."

Now a founder of the Last Ocean Charitable Trust, created to raise awareness of the Ross Sea within New Zealand, Young says this documentary has been a labour of love.

"We managed to get some funds from New Zealand on Air and Prime TV, but I haven't been paid for this for six years. That's really the reality of making documentaries in New Zealand now."

Christchurch's own brushes with mother nature have also tested Young's resolve, especially when February 22, 2011, was the first day the trust had a paid employee.

"It has been a challenge, but no more so than for anyone else. Our office was trashed and all the computers fell down, but we got off pretty lightly."

Now operating out of a garage at the back of his central Christchurch home, Young is philosophical about the challenges ahead. "While we're going to rebuild Christchurch and make it a better city, once you destroy the Ross Sea, you can't rebuild it."

Screening as part of the New Zealand International Film Festival, *The Last Ocean* (PG) plays at 8.30pm on Thursday, 1.30pm on Friday, 6.30pm next Saturday and 11.45am next Sunday at Hoyts Northlands. For more information, see *The Press* Entertainment pages, or nziff.co.nz.

Peter Young will be present at the inaugural NZ Icefest, Sep 14-Oct 14, in Christchurch. See nzicefest.co.nz.