

# Amos Nachoum

Interview by Edwin Marcow  
Photographs by Amos Nachoum

**Amos Nachoum, world acclaimed wildlife photographer is the recipient of numerous photographic awards and acknowledgements for his ground breaking work in free diving with Great White Sharks and Orcas in the open ocean, speaks to underwater photographer, Edwin Marcow, about his life, work and vision.**

Amos was born in Israel in 1954. Today, he is based in San Francisco, California, USA.

*EM: Amos how did you get started in photography?*

AN: I was aged 12 and I knew that is what I wanted to do. For me, it was more evolutionary — I did not know what format of photography I wanted to do, but my desire and love for this art form started here.

*EM: When you were a youngster growing up, were there any particular photographers that you admired or tried to emulate?*

AN: For me it was not a question of any particular photographer. It was the concept of holding the camera adjusting and 'pushing' the camera's f-stop's shutter speed, and so on, to create the desired image that I had in my mind. This was a tool to communicate with others. I could not communicate very well when it came to writing and speaking in order to get across what I was trying to say.

While I was growing up, I had a difficult time within the family, and there were times when I did not always see eye to eye with my father. My mom would inadvertently take his side, so the medium and art form of photography became my escape — a way to express my self.

*EM: Amos when did you get your first break in photography?*

AN: As a youngster, I was fascinated by photography. I ran around the streets in Israel, camera in hand, photographing the people that I came across. My pictures were being sold and published by newspapers in Israel.

*EM: When was your first break in marine and wildlife photography?*

AN: I settled in the States in 1990-91. At that time, I was exchanging advertising

for stories, so naturally the magazines would use my images for the story. But this was a business arrangement to raise awareness for my Adventure Travel Company Big Animals. When I became a full time photographer, and not just a tour operator, I had to rethink everything that I had done previously.

So, I took a loan from the bank of \$4000 dollars, and I gave myself assignments to complete. I imagined that I had received a commission to shoot for National Geographic and to do a story.

I went to the island of Serbine in the Netherland Antilles, because I was very familiar with the Island and it's geography. I had good connections there. I shot the Island from the air, land and water.

This project took three weeks to complete. I chose only 15 images to portray the Island with the supporting article. I made several photocopies, and then sent this package to 55 different magazines around the US.

I sent this package to diverse and broad magazines in the travel and leisure market and to National Geographic.

The Condor Naste Traveller magazine gave me my first break. At this time, I was driving a taxi in New York to cover my costs. Then, I received a request from them to cover a story on Bonaire,



▲ TOP: Amos Nachoum  
▲ Tail of a Humpback whale, Niue, South Pacific

# Profiles



army often working whilst under fire. The discipline that I acquired from being under fire, having to cope with being put into strange situations, and understanding how to prepare for it, makes me feel a lot more comfortable underwater with any subject. Of course, no encounter is the same as another.

This has helped me when it comes to shooting underwater with large predators such as Great White

sharks. which included both topside images and marine life, though only from the perspective of snorkelling. This was 1991. From then on, things just took off.

*EM: Amos, What would you say is your greatest achievement to date?*

*AN: Well, for me that would have to be that I am still doing what I love to do — rather than one individual experience or achievement.*

*EM: What is the scariest or most dangerous situation you have been in?*

*AN: In general, I have had a good grounding [in risky situations] from the many years I worked as a war correspondent and photographer in the Israeli*



the boat manoeuvred between myself and the polar bear to allow me safe passage onto the boat.

Other than the incident with the polar bear, all encounters with wildlife have been peaceful, as long as my mind-set is on the right plane and the circumstances fall into

sharks.

Underwater, I have had only one scary moment — when I encountered a polar bear. This was the most memorable moment of my life. Indeed, it was scary. In fact, I had to move the camera out of a shooting position and concentrate on saving myself.

I dived as deep as I could, to keep myself out of the reach of the polar bear. This took place about three years ago. But it is still on my agenda. I want to get a picture of a polar bear underwater in the wild—fully body in frame—precisely because all polar bear pictures have been taken in zoos where the bears are in captivity. The feet have been cut off or you only have an image with part of the

bear's body in the frame.

There have been only three photographers in the world who have been in the water with polar bears. One was an Italian filmmaker, now in his late 70's, whom I interviewed prior to my trip to the High Arctic. He advised me that a polar bear cannot dive deeper than 9 meters, or 30 feet. Armed with this information, I thought that I could dive to 40 feet and still achieve what I was looking for while working with the right lens. Well! No one told the polar bear this! For low and behold, the polar bear surprised me, defied all the rules and followed me down to about 24 meters (80 feet). But as I am usually ready for surprises and the unexpected, I took the necessary steps to prevent getting hurt. Upon my ascent,

place.

*EM: Amos have you ever been bitten?*

*AN: [laughs] Well, these Great White sharks are very large fish! I have been bitten by a Clown fish. [He laughs]. At the time of the polar bear shoot, I was nearly bitten by a walrus, but due to a malfunction on the boat, the boat could not come to my aid. And there I was—in the water with this walrus mid-channel between the boat and the flow ice—without cover from the boat, as this large female closed the ground between us. I kicked out with*

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- ◀ LEFT: An underwater photographer takes photos of a Humpback whale and its calf, Niue, South Pacific
- ◀ CENTER: A diver swims with the infant Humpback whale, Niue, South Pacific
- ▼ Spectacular shot of a killer whale diving to deeper depths, Norway

my fins to fend off her attack. About to get bitten or gored, I turned to my side, and then she sank her tusks into my dry suit where she tore two large holes into the side of the suit, thankfully missing my groin. I got quite wet from that but no real injury.

She could have done a lot more damage. [He laughs]. She just wanted to push me out of the way.



*EM: How do you plan to push the envelope further, and how do you plan to cap your already amazing achievements?*

AN: Pushing the envelope is a mindset that I apply even in everyday life. It is not something that I plan to do in advance.

When I am in the field, I weigh up the situation from what is going on around me, and then knowing what other people have done, what pictures have already been taken, bearing all this in mind and blessed with a quick memory, and based on emulating not copying what other people have achieved – I bring this with me to the field, with camera in hand. I see what I want to shoot but with the knowledge of what has been done before. I

see what can I do differently without endangering myself or others around me.

For me, it does not make a difference if I am taking a picture, of a Clown fish or a crocodile, or if I am on location in the North Pole. I do not push the envelope for the sake of “pushing the envelope”. It is a total understanding of personal and group safety, what has been done before and what I can do. While knowing what is going on in the field at the

time, I take new pictures with new results.

*EM: What cameras and lenses do you use?*

AN: I shoot with two Nikon RS,



and now I am shooting with a Hasselblad X Pan—an old concept brought back into fashion.

For the first time, a dedicated housing has been made for this camera by Aquatica in Canada, especially for me, and I am testing it here in Gansbaai on the Great White, and next, in the Cayman Islands to do some reef diving with this set up and test it further.

I am one of the first in the world to take this camera underwater,

and to shoot with it. Although, what is more important to me is to bring new images to the world.

*EM: What is your favourite lens?*

AN: There is only one, and that is

the fish eye, because water is 800 times denser than air, and anything we photograph, from more than one metre, loses its impact, power, and beauty, which Mother Nature provided, other than calibration, textures and shape.

The fish eye does the job. It is so sharp, it allows you to get closer to the subject. It can bring you very close to your subject and still fit everything in the frame.

*EM: What is your preferred film*

*choice and speed?*

AN: Kodachrome 64. It's a hard film to use. You have to be absolutely spot on with it. What is also very difficult is that it is almost impossible to have it developed anywhere in the world today. It's an excellent film, especially underwater, because it is so neutral, and with all that filtration of colours underwater already happening, you do not want to be “pushing” it further with a film that is already pushing the RGB spectrum through its chemical make up.

E6 processed films are already filtered, with blues, reds, and yellows, and Kodachrome brings that all alive when used underwater.

*EM: Film versus Digital?*

AN: Digital is here. It is the future. It will be better than film one day—no question. I still prefer to use film, because I know it so well. I enjoy working with it. In my opinion, film still has a higher quality. There is more depth in film. It has more texture than digital.

Sooner or later, digital will be able to achieve these results as well, which film gives you now.

I know that Fuji has come up with new chips. I think they are 11 or 12 MB files—6 MB are for highlights and 6 MB are for shadows or low light. I have not tested this myself. I have just heard about it.

So, in a year or so, digital will be as good or better than film. Personally, I will be waiting for the



◀ INSET: Napping polar bear, High Arctic, Canada

▲ TOP: A hunting wild dolphin breaches the surface, Sardine Run, South Africa

▲ BOTTOM: A leaping wild dolphin is captured on film in mid-air, Sardine Run, South Africa



◀ A dramatic moment when a leaping shark nabs its fleeing prey, a seal, for dinner, South Africa

mother and calf Humpback whale vertical in the water. I called it, *The Renaissances*.

Then, there was the Nikon 1993 award for a Great White lunging out of the water.

Nature's Best, the most prestigious wildlife and photography magazine in the world, gave my work an award in 2003.

I also got recognized by The Editorial Communication Arts magazine, which is the leading magazine in the US for general photography, and a cover for Rodale's Scuba Diving magazine, which was a half in-half out picture taken in the water of a diver with his fins in the air and his body in water, head facing towards the sea floor.

I felt that this image was my best work, because I was shooting with a fish eye lens that cannot use any filters. I balanced the exposure between the diver in and out of the water. This image really was for me, 'thinking out of the box'. I like this image the most due to the fact of how hard it was to balance the different exposures—from being underwater to topside and having to think out of the box to get it right.

On a last note about my photography and my continued pursuit in this field... It is not only a love for shooting in the water with large marine subjects, it is mostly my love and appreciation of photography, and what I can say with an image that I cannot with words. What I think most

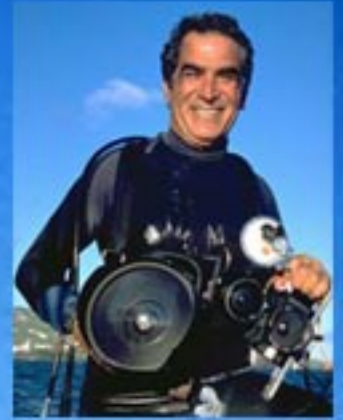
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underwater photographers miss, and what we are missing, is that people are not realising that they need to bring all the understanding and discipline of topside photography, which is so evolved, to the underwater realm.

Many of us have too narrow a point of view when it comes to underwater photography. One should have an understanding and love of all the great artists and emulate them, such as Monet, Rembrandt and Van Gogh. Look at paintings that have come out of these spectacular minds. Understand the rules of leading lines, beauty, light, drama, fear, power, and bring this into your work.

Painters and photographers are very similar, even though painters work with a blank canvas and have to add colours, shape and texture. Whereas, we go underwater, and we have the help of the greatest artist of them all, Mother Nature, who has painted everything for us. The only problem is that nature hides this element and colour from us, because number one, there is a lot happening down there (e.g. predation), and two, there is loss of light. We only need to learn how to understand white light and ambient light and how to read it.

In summary, I do not believe that marine photography is a genre in its own right. Marine photography is just another form of photography, and if one learns more from what has been done before—on land or by the great artists—one can bring this with oneself underwater and create better images. ■



AMOS NACHOUM'S  
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