

Tony Wu

Underwater photography requires many additional skills that only an obsessive mind can master. **Tony Wu** freely admits that he is an obsessive. Keith Wilson caught up with him after a recently sold-out lecture...



Tony Wu Profile

- Prior to devoting his life to underwater photography, Tony Wu earned an honours degree from an Ivy League school and a scholarship to study in Japan.
- His passion for diving and marine wildlife took him to Singapore, where he became a regular contributor to *Asian Diver* magazine
- More than 25 years later, Tony is renowned as one of the world's most respected underwater photographers, particularly of great whales.
- His work has been honoured by numerous awards, including Wildlife Photographer of the Year and he is a sought after speaker and judge of international photography contests, including Big Picture and Nature Photographer of the Year.

www.tony-wu.com
www.tonywublog.com

T

ony Wu has spent more time swimming with whales than probably anyone else alive, but he's not one to brag about it. His award-winning

photos of whale

behaviour are used extensively by the scientific community to illustrate their research and he's often called by them to share his latest observations of the world's largest creatures. In person, Tony is a soft-spoken man, who prefers the company of whales and other sea animals to his fellow photographers. And yet, when he speaks to an audience of thousands, a classroom of school children, or a group at a dinner table, he is able to hold everyone's gaze with almost hypnotic attention. He's worth getting to know, not just for the stories behind his photos, but for a devilish sense of humour and to find out the reasons behind his fascination with whale poo...

At what point did you know that underwater photography was

what you wanted to do for the rest of your life?

Well, ever since I was a kid, I've loved the ocean. There has never been a moment in my life when I haven't. I don't know why or how it happened, but it's always been there.

Where were you raised, where was your first ocean?

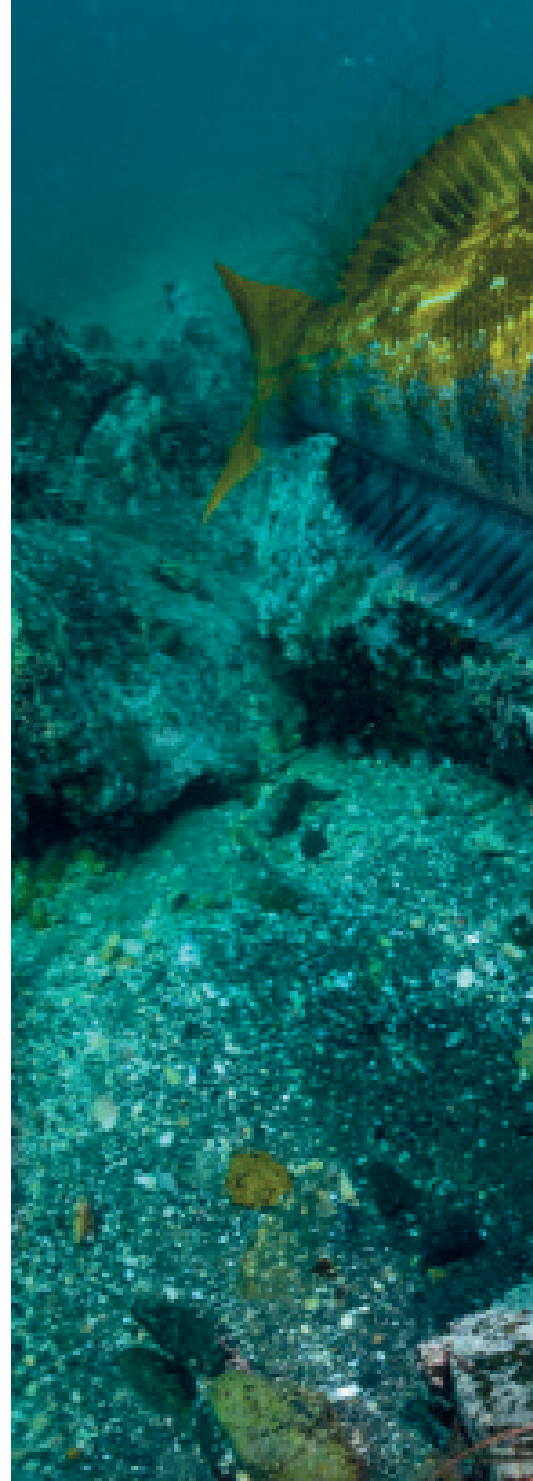
I moved around a lot, so there is no one single place, but for much of my life I was near enough to oceans that I would visit. This would be with family or friends, or when I got old enough, by myself. I remember being very young, wading into the ocean and looking around and poking things. Then a crab pinches your toe and you go, 'ouch!' I remember thinking not that it was painful, but that this is a really cool animal! I was six or seven, but my fascination was more important than the pain.



I spent two weeks every morning at five in the morning, going in the water and making friends with this one fish and following the entire life cycle

Previous page: An extreme close-up of a 2cm yellow pygmy goby, perched at the entrance to its burrow 29m deep in the western Pacific Ocean, off the coast of Japan. Taken with the micro-Nikon 105mm f/2.8 macro lens on a Nikon D800.

Below: A humpback whale breaching on a summer's night in Alaska. It was 9.30pm and the low-angle sun illuminated the whale and ocean spray in a golden light.



What did your family think of your fascination with the ocean?

Being very conservative Chinese, my family basically frowned upon anything that had to do with getting dirty and being outdoors, anything physical and in the sun, or involving sand; no wind, no salt. But despite family disapproval, it was always in me – it was just there. I knew I wanted to go into the ocean, but I never had a chance until after I started working, because it takes money... I was in my early 20s before I even got the chance to dive.

I got into one of those trial scuba courses and the guy I was with, after a couple of minutes, just let me go. We came out eventually and he said, "you're completely at home. I can't



believe you didn't need any help." I didn't really know that much at that point, but I wasn't scared, it felt very natural. I knew, somehow, somewhere, it was going to happen.

You just needed the chance. Where was that?

That was in the Philippines, but the actual decision to make that my career, my life, didn't happen at once. I started taking photos, first buying a camera to use on land. The first one I bought was back in 1989, a beat-up, second-hand, Nikon F2A. Do you remember those?

I do, yeah!

Workhorses. I took lots of shitty photos, because I didn't know →

Above: This male fat greenling is tending eggs which comprise several clutches from different females. Shot with a Nikon D850 and Nikon 60mm f/2.8 macro lens.

* THICK OR FIN?

MANY DIVERS CHOOSE THE LATEST AND MOST EXPENSIVE FINS FOR DIVING. NOT TONY...

What fins do you use?

Well, everybody has to have carbon fibre fins now and they're spending about \$600 to \$700. It's stupid! Carbon-fibre fins are great for free divers who want to go down with as little effort as possible, but if you're doing twists and turns and going fast, they suck! I have the cheapest long fins, \$80, and they're ace. I tell people, but nobody believes me because I don't have the latest and greatest stuff! With the longer fins you need to have the musculature and fitness. I'd say 99 per cent of the people who have the long fins have neither, so they're just hurting themselves, because all they're doing is creating more weight. I use longer inexpensive plastic fins, and I'm lucky because the foot pockets fit my feet, so I don't need socks, which is crucial because it means I can put them on and off and react quickly.





what I was doing. I wasted lots of money, but I learned as a result. By the time I got my first underwater housing for a camera, around five years later, I had a Nikon F90. My wife, who was my girlfriend at the time, for a birthday present bought me the housing. She saw that I was reading about them all the time; she saw the obsession, so she bought one for me. We went on our first trip together and I took 50 rolls of film underwater with me. I came back and got them developed and the photos just sucked!

How did you react?

I was absolutely convinced there was something wrong with the camera! With hindsight, I wished I had kept some of those because they were god awful, but they would be great for talks! I get obsessed about things, so I studied hard and, fortunately, the learning curve for me was quick in that two to three years later I was reasonably proficient.

What was your first break in getting your pictures published?

About that time a magazine in Asia started up, called *Asian Diver*, and I had just moved to Singapore where they were based. I dropped off some slides there and they called me within five minutes of driving home and said, "can you come back and talk to the editor?" So, we got on really well and I started doing stuff for them. At that point, it was a hobby and English is not my first language, but I started writing for them and in the process of writing I started to improve because now I had a reason to. Again,

because I get obsessed about things the learning curve was pretty quick and I got better and better, so by the year 2000 I was writing compelling articles with very compelling photos. I became a regular contributor for them and other magazines.

In those formative days, what were the sea creatures that you were obsessing about?

Being based in Singapore, I was in the epicentre of marine diversity – in that region are all the coral reefs and I started looking at all the small animals. It's called macro diving, but there weren't many people doing that, which was great because most of the time I'd be underwater sitting with the animal, all by myself.

One of the first animals I obsessed about were jawfish. They hold their eggs in their mouths until they hatch. I spent two weeks every morning at five in the morning, going in the water and making friends with this one fish and following the entire life cycle. It got to the point where this one fish had eggs in its mouth that were about to hatch, it knew me.

It knew you? How do you mean?

In the beginning, it was a little bit



People are taking photos of whales that are clearly swimming away, because they're feeling scared

Above: A pair of spotnape cardinal fish, with the female at the front, swim close together in readiness for the moment when she will push out her eggs.

Left: In the warm waters of Tonga, in the South Pacific, this female humpback whale has just brought down her tail fin (fluke) onto the ocean surface, creating a 'fluke print' with the bubbles streaming from the fluke tips. Tony used a Nikon 8-15mm f/3.5-4.5 at 15mm for this perfectly composed image.

nervous and ducked into its little burrow, but by the end I would show up and it wouldn't worry about it. Then, on the day we predicted it was going to release the eggs, I wanted someone to help me to hold the focus light, because it was still dark when this was happening. So, another guy came along and as soon as he showed up the fish ducked. When he backed off the fish came out – clearly the fish could tell the difference between the two of us. I can't explain it, I don't want to argue with the scientists about it.

But you got the shot?

I got the shot. Now, people do it all the time but, to the best of my knowledge, there were no shots before that. Then I published a book in 2001, which won a huge award and it helped to make this type of diving popular. Within a few years, all the places where I was used to diving alone suddenly had 30 to 40 divers! That's when I started working with whales, because people weren't doing that at the time.

People had photographed whales before, of course, but what were you attempting that was different?

I'm talking about really understanding the animals and learning about their life cycle and what makes them, *them*. Every type of living organism has more than one thing that makes them uniquely them. I'm not just talking about taking a photograph; anybody can do that really. I'm talking about capturing their essence.

How do you do that?

A lot of the images you see of whales, they're actually running away. People are taking photos of whales that are clearly swimming away, because they're feeling scared, or harassed. So, before you go, 'wow, that's a great picture', think about what that shows. If you look at my photos, we're making eye contact, we're friends, we've played together; they've chosen to associate with me, or they're in the middle of this very important social activity, and they've allowed me to come in and be among them – because I'm not annoying them. There's the difference.

It's about immersion and being immersive. →



Yes, and thinking about, why are they doing this; what are they getting out of it; how do they feel? That's very important, because they do feel; they have emotions; they do have a personality. They have moods just like we do. Some people say that can't happen. It does happen! A lot of the photos I show resulted because they let me in and I photographed from inside their society.

A lot of people reading this have never photographed a whale,



Among the science community, I am the number one source for whale poop images in the world!

certainly not in the way that you describe, so how difficult is it?

It's not difficult to get a snapshot. It is extremely difficult to capture their essence, because in order to do so, you need to understand their life cycle; you need to understand what they're doing, why they're doing it and how they're doing. That requires a lot of observation time.

How much time have spent with whales in total?

I don't keep count, but it's thousands of hours. It's not just the time, it's what you do with it. When I'm looking at them, every single second, I'm trying to figure out what each one is doing and what their roles are and how they're associating.

How close do you get to the whales for your work?

Very close. Often a metre, or maybe a metre and a half.

Above: Tony Wu floats effortlessly close to a pod of sperm whales, while photographing one which is defecating conspicuously. Note his long fins and the absence of scuba gear; Tony prefers to swim underwater without supplementary oxygen.

Shorter focal length lenses are the standard with underwater photography, what do you use?

Obviously, whales are big and, if you're a metre and a half away, you need something ultra-wide, like a 15mm fisheye. There are some people who try to use longer lenses to get close-ups and I'm totally not into that. For me, I want the whole animal, the entire thing.

What about strobe?

I do use strobes, but not for subjects like whales, because whales are moving and they're so big! It's very rare that you're going to be able to light up any part of it. I'm swimming and freediving and there are days when I swim many kilometres with whales, so the last thing you want is a drag – a strobe is not going to help you. I tell people to use the smallest equipment possible, with the lowest profile in terms of friction and drag.



If you look at my photos, we're making eye contact, we're friends, we've played together

Even my suit – I tried all sorts of things and I ended up having it custom made. I prefer very thin suits with incredibly slick surfaces that allow me to go really fast.

Which camera do you work with now – what do you pack?

Today, my go-to would be the Nikon D850 and appropriate lenses. When the D850 came out, the reviews were so good, and I was already familiar with using the D800, so I went to a place to try it out. It just felt so good and I was able to take some test shots and look at the files – they looked great, so I took the plunge and got that camera.

It's a beautiful camera, the files are ridiculously incredible and I can say it is the first camera that I've owned, since digital at least, that has made me look like a better photographer than I am. There are many cases where I've come out and I look at the photo and I go, 'what! I took that?' I'll take all the help that I can get.

Let's talk about whale poo! What's it like to be shat on and how did you recover from such a traumatic experience?

(Laughs) Some years ago, as I spent more time with whales and getting better at being accepted by them, I realized that I got pooped on... a lot! At first, it was annoying and then I asked the question why are they doing this? I was looking specifically at sperm whales and it occurred to me that quite often when they poo you can't see them.

You can't see them?

Well, of course, Keith, because the poo is so thick and so big! It's like a huge smokescreen – you can't see anything. I started thinking, 'what else does this? Squid's ink! Like the squid, could the whales be doing this in self-defence? No, that's silly.' I kept this to myself for a while, then I read this passage from a book called



The Great Sperm Whale, by Richard Ellis. He referred to a case of how a close relative, dwarf sperm whales, would shit to cover themselves up when they were caught in a net. I emailed Richard, because he had bought some photos of mine to illustrate his book, and I sent him the photographs I took of the sperm whale poop cloud.

What did he say

He wrote back to say a self-defence mechanism is possible. Apparently, among the science community, I am the number one source for whale poop images in the world, so we exchange information quite a lot. It turns out that whale poop is very valuable for the circulation of nutrients around the entire globe, which then feeds into creating a lot of phytoplankton, which captures carbon, which then sinks to the bottom of the ocean. So, instead of

Above: Xxx xxxx xx
x xx x xxxxxxxx

trying to think about fancy machines to capture the carbon, we should just let the whales be and let them poop.

You use this knowledge with your photos in talks to school children?

Yes, I try to speak to kids as much as possible, because that's where change can be made for the long term. The challenge, of course, with kids is to keep them interested and I always try to get down to their level. Everyone sits on the floor and I'm in the middle, we're eye to eye, we're chatting, they're asking questions and pointing to my iPad. Then, with a straight face you start talking about whale poop and you show them pictures of whales pooping and, my god, you're friends for life!

It is a great way to end the interview. I think we can say this has been a shitty interview!

That was so crappy. Thank you. **M**



A WHALE OF A RESPONSIBILITY

TONY'S ENCOUNTERS WITH WHALES HAVE INCLUDED A TIME WHEN HE WAS UNEXPECTEDLY CALLED UPON TO DO SOME BABYSITTING...

Tell me about when you photographed a bunch of whales sleeping...

Sleeping is a bit misleading, but definitely resting. I was on a boat with friends and their kids and we came across this female with a calf, she went right under the boat and almost lifted it up. Then she came around and around. It was unusual, so I slipped into the water and she takes one look at me, then comes right up to me and stops. Her calf is with her and my interpretation was, 'can you babysit?' She stops and droops and the calf starts to play with me, then I call my friends to come in.

Wow!

My speculation is, that as a younger whale she had encountered people before, so was quite familiar with people and was very relaxed around us. The important thing is that nobody else came and once I realized there were no other boats in our area I told our captain, "no, don't tell anyone!" We spent two to three hours with her. The kids were good and I showed them the whales right up close. We had five kids and they had a great time. They'll never top that when it comes to memories, that's for sure!