



“If Oceans Could Speak”

Episode #5 English Transcript

Greg Lecoeur : Telling stories from under the sea

[00:00:00] **Greg:** The Mediterranean is poorly known and understood and should be looked at in a different light. At least, we should be curious, and take a closer look, because it has nothing to envy to the other seas of the world.

[00:00:16] **Pierre:** Hello everyone. Welcome to another episode of season two of If Oceans Could Speak, and this second season is entirely dedicated to the Mediterranean.

My name is Pierre and with the series If Oceans Could Speak, I am one of your guides who will help you discover stories, experiences, who will help you discover hidden facets of the ocean, the links between us and the ocean and some of the individual and collective responsibilities we have to ensure its protection.

Today we are very pleased to welcome Greg Lecoeur. Greg, hello. [00:01:03] Greg is a photojournalist, an artist, an author of books, and is strongly committed to the preservation of the oceans. His documentation, tells us stories about the oceans, making us aware of its need for preservation, the preservation of ecosystems. Greg was awarded the title of National Geographic's Best Nature Photographer in 2016 for a spectacular shot of the sardine race. He has been honoured with many other international awards since then, such as Underwater Photographer of the Year and the Grand Prize at the 2000 Sienna International Photo Awards.

Greg, thank you for being with us today and we'll be listening to you to discover a world that many of us don't know and probably don't understand. So, let's start from the beginning. You grew up on the balcony of the Mediterranean, in Nice. Have you always been fascinated by the Mediterranean and has this fascination changed over time?

[00:02:18] **Greg:** Yes, I'm originally from Nice. So I grew up between the Mercantour mountains and the Mediterranean Sea. So it's true that since I was a child, I've been passionate about nature and the sea has taken over. We are from the generation of Captain Cousteau, from the film The Big Blue. It inspired us and led me to read a lot about marine biology and how marine ecosystems work. So, I did my diving classes. I spent a lot of time in the Mediterranean, snorkelling, then scuba diving, seeing what I liked, especially marine biology.

[00:02:58] **Pierre:** So this triggered your passion?

[00:03:02] **Greg:** At first, it was really to satisfy a passion. I would say a hobby. I was trying to spend as much time as possible at sea to go diving, to go exploring, to discover marine species that we can meet in the Mediterranean, with, deep down, a desire to explore the planet from the other side of the mirror, in all the seas of the world.

[00:03:29] **Pierre:** In fact, before becoming a photojournalist, you started your career with business management before changing course towards a life that perhaps resembles a little more





an adventurer's life. How does this first experience in business management help you today in your career as an underwater adventurer?

[00:03:49] **Greg:** I started by following the path of my father who had a company in electronic scales. And it's true that when you're young, you idealise your future life a little bit. And I imagined my father's path by taking over and building a family. Reproducing what he had already produced. Then life made me realise that we each had our own destiny, that we each had our own future, that we were different.

For ten years, I was a company director and, as I was saying earlier, all my free time was devoted to diving and sailing in the Mediterranean. One day, off Nice, I had an incredible encounter with a group of pilot whales. Pilot whales are bottlenose dolphins. It was quite incredible because these animals are very social. There was a group of fifty to eighty individuals. That day was fabulous, I cut the engine of my boat. They came and clung to the hull of the boat. These are cetaceans that really come to escort the boats. I let myself drift and they were all around the boat, settling in. I could hear them from the boat, I could see them among themselves: they were sticking their heads out of the water, they were curious, they were looking at the boat.

It was really quite an incredible encounter, and in the Mediterranean too. So I knew that I regularly came across dolphins and turtles. But pilot whales are marine species that you don't necessarily imagine in the Mediterranean. But that day, this encounter with these pilot whales...I didn't even know they existed, it was really something quite incredible. When I went ashore, I told a little about this encounter and few people knew of their existence. People were even a little sceptical that such animals could be seen in the Mediterranean. So from there, I bought a camera and I started to bring back images, testimonies of my adventures on the open sea.

[00:05:51] **Pierre:** Finally, it was nature and the ocean that called you to become a photojournalist?

[00:05:57] **Greg:** Yes, you could say that. What's important in my work is to tell stories through images. My animal encounters. What I try to do is to show the beauty, to try to magnify the ocean, the animals, to try to catch a glimpse of emotion for the general public. So that people become a little bit interested in this environment and from there, we can start to pass on messages of preservation. Young people are a very, very good audience for them.

And to answer your first question: the fact that I used to be a company director allowed me to build projects, to build trips, to realise that in life, we all have arms and legs. We are all equal and can achieve incredible things. We just have to be brave and believe in it. And what I wanted to do was to make my dreams come true. My childhood dream, which was to follow in the footsteps of Captain Cousteau in the film *The Big Blue*, was to spend my time at sea. So I set off like that. For a year, I went around the world with my camera. I travelled and explored all the seas of the world. I left everything in France and when I came back, I really started to publish my images, my work. One thing led to another. Today, I live my passion and my childhood dream to the fullest.





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[00:07:25] **Pierre:** Since the first camera purchase, I think there have been many more since...And when you look at the whole collection of images that you have produced, that you shared, what goes through your mind? How does it make you feel? Proud, excited or anxious?

[00:07:43] **Greg:** No, no, I'm very proud of what I've accomplished. When you're doing a job, you're passionate about, you don't really see it as a job. You're happy to get up in the morning and go do what you love. And so the days go by quickly. The months go by quickly. The years often follow one another. It's even hard to take a step back and sit down. And to look back at the journey and the work accomplished. Five years after I changed my life, I was named Nature Photographer of the Year by National Geographic. And then I said to myself, "Well, I was right to take the risk of changing my life". And that was it, the bet was won. This event made me realise that I had done the right thing in listening to my passion for ocean photography and following it.

And since then, I have been trying to set up more committed projects. To really tell the story of the oceans and not to pass on messages of preservation and to raise public awareness both in the Mediterranean and in the different oceans of the planet.

[00:08:47] **Pierre:** How do you get to the final product, whether it's the story or the award-winning photo? In particular I think of the crabeater seals - for the listeners go and see it on the internet, it's quite impressive - how do you go about this process of creating or constructing this story that you will then share with others to raise awareness?

[00:09:12] **Greg:** We are working with nature. So it's nature that will offer us opportunities that we'll have to seize. If we take the example of this photo of the crabeater seal in Antarctica, it's a job that started a year or even two years before we set up an expedition to Antarctica. This one was set up in the best possible way, I think, to have the least impact on the environment.

We went on a small sailing boat. We were a small crew in the summer, on a sailing boat that was about 15 metres long to go and explore the Antarctic Peninsula. At the beginning, we had to sail in rather hostile seas. If I tell you Cape Horn, the Drake Passage, these are places that are quite famous and quite feared even by the best skippers in the world. So it's already an adventure, it's complicated. It's hard to go there. Once there, we dived in extreme conditions. The water is minus one degree.

Our photographic quest had two objectives: At home, we hear about global warming, climate change. But it's a little hard to put your finger on it. The poles are the first observers of these climate changes. So, we wanted to go and see what was happening with our own eyes, to bring our testimonies, our experience.

And I had another quest, I would say a little more selfish, from a photographic point of view, which was to go and meet the leopard seal. It is one of the biggest predators on the planet, living in the most hostile place on the planet. To go and meet it, for me, was something to be able to observe this animal in its natural habitat and to document its animal behaviours, particularly predation on penguins.





So we had this quest in mind. During the expedition, the most beautiful encounter I had... in fact, it is on the cover of the Antarctic book. This unexpected encounter with four or five crabeater seals that came to give us a real dance along the icebergs. There was this atmosphere with the iceberg in the background where the seals came to play hide and seek in its crevices. It was quite exceptional. So, we managed to get some images, we really seized the opportunity. When you work like that, with nature, you might have a project in mind, a story to tell. But very often, it doesn't really happen the way you hoped, the way you imagined it. That's what makes this work, wildlife photography, so charming. So, the stories we tell, we leave with a project, we have an idea, but the story is created on the spot in fact. And then once you're there, it's totally different from how you imagine it. Then things happen. So afterwards we come back with lots of stories to tell.

[00:12:14] **Pierre:** Did you actually see leopard seals or not at all?

[00:12:17] **Greg:** Yes, we saw leopard seals. That was really exceptional. We had a hard time meeting them. These animals have a bad reputation, a bit like sharks and others. But they are just predators that are at the top of the food chain, that are vitally important for the health and balance of the oceans. Their diet is, for example, krill and baby penguins when they go back to sea. When they are young, they are, I would say, a little bit clumsy. They have just been born, they are two or three months old, and they have to go to sea. When they go to sea, they have to learn a little bit in the water. So, they are poor swimmers, I would say, and therefore easy prey. This is what we wanted to document, when the leopards were hunting these little penguins. But unfortunately, we couldn't document that, we couldn't observe that. We saw leopards and some interactions in the water with leopards. But we couldn't see this predation. This is simply because the life cycle in Antarctica has been totally disrupted, particularly by the melting ice.

The penguins need to come ashore to nest. They have to wait for the ice pack to melt when summer comes. The melting of the ice means that the surface pack ice freezes when winter arrives and the pack ice is colder at the surface, so it takes longer in summer to open the sea so that the penguins can return to their nesting site, which delays the reproduction process. In any case, I'm not a scientist, but that's what we saw on the spot. It's at the end of the summer, normally. We had to leave before the ice closed up with the arrival of winter.

[00:14:20] **Pierre:** I hear leopard seals, baby penguins, temperatures. You can feel that these are already strong experiences. Do you have any other experiences that have particularly marked you? Are there any related to the Mediterranean?

[00:14:37] **Greg:** Of course. I am partial to the Mediterranean, even if today I have the chance to explore the different seas and oceans of the planet. I always enjoy coming back to the Mediterranean. Go diving there. The Mediterranean is like no other sea or ocean. It's only one per cent of the surface of the oceans, but it's home to ten per cent of the world's known species and known marine species. So, it's a sea that's full of biodiversity, it's really a hotspot for biodiversity. And in the Mediterranean, we will also find... we were talking about crabeater seals in Antarctica, but you should know that in the Mediterranean, there is also the monk seal.

A hundred years ago, it was very common along our coasts. Today it is a species that is really endangered because of man's fault. Fortunately, there are a few colonies in Greece and today they are repopulating the Mediterranean a little. In the Mediterranean too, we will find whales,





dolphins, turtles, sharks, rays. We'll find all the species that we find in the whole world. I have seen them in the Mediterranean as well as in other oceans which may have names that sound a bit more tropical, that make you dream a bit more.

For me, the Mediterranean is really an incredible sea, with a great wealth of treasures, but which unfortunately is not well known. I am often told that the Mediterranean is a dead sea, one of the most polluted seas in the world. It is true that it is a closed sea and that there is a huge population living along the Mediterranean coast. It is polluted, but it has incredible species. In particular the monk seal and also the angel shark. It's a shark that gave its name to the Bay of Angels and that also in other times was very common along our coasts and that has also disappeared since.

We had some rather exceptional species like the angel shark and the monk seal. But there are still species like pilot whales, like the rorqual, which is the second largest whale on the planet. There are different species of sharks. There are turtles, there are rays, there is all this biodiversity. I'm only talking about the emblematic species here. But we will also find many colours. When you go diving on the Mediterranean reefs, you'll find coralligenous and then you'll find species that live in the rock like nudibranchs, like galatheas, species that are very colourful.

We will also find, for example, the posidonia, which is really vital to the Mediterranean ecosystem. The posidonia is the lung of the Mediterranean and it is a plant that absorbs CO2 and transmits the oxygen that we breathe. I think it is important today to be aware that this is a sea that is vital for us. Instead of perhaps saying that it is too polluted, that it is a sea where there is not much to see, perhaps we should change our mindset. On the contrary, we should try to take action in our daily lives, in our consumption patterns, in our lifestyles, to make small daily gestures that will allow us to improve things and to have a sustainable future.

[00:18:09] **Pierre:** The nature, this very rich biodiversity, do you communicate it differently from other spaces you have visited?

[00:18:19] **Greg:** No, the Mediterranean is very close to my heart. Until now, I have been carrying out missions, I would say more in the short to medium term. The Mediterranean is really a long-term project. In fact, I am currently finishing my work on the Mediterranean. I still have two years of campaigning in the field to revisit the Mediterranean. The idea behind it is to carry out a huge awareness campaign through publications in magazines, open-air exhibitions, and meetings with the public, especially children. The idea is to launch a big movement, a new breath. We would talk about the Mediterranean and we would try to change the way people look at the Mediterranean.

[00:19:12] **Pierre:** This links to my next question: in the photos you produce, we see a lot of nature and what about the people who live around and are connected to this marine ecosystem, how do you talk to them? What do they tell you? What do you tell them to explain your passion, your approach?

[00:19:32] **Greg:** This is a very good question. The idea of the Mediterranean project is to bring in the work of a photojournalist by documenting what we'll call anthropic pressures on the one hand. So, I would say the nuisances caused by man and on the other hand, to document the work of these people, these local actors who try to carry out actions on a daily basis to preserve the Mediterranean. It can be scientists, associations, guides, people in the ports.





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The idea is to go out and collect testimonies from everyone and to bring together all these testimonies and to create synergies between the different actors, the different professions of the sea. Because in fact, we all have the same objective, which is the preservation of the Mediterranean Sea. It's true that when I talk to people, there are a lot of people who are very involved in the Mediterranean. They do it with their small means, they do it on their own scale. Everyone is joining forces to carry out large awareness campaigns like this to try to change things.

I think that if we want to have a sustainable future for our future generations, each of us, and this is not only valid for the Mediterranean, it is valid on a planetary scale, each of us has the means, the power to change things. But it really comes down to very simple gestures in our daily lives. But a real change, a real awareness, is a real change in our consumption habits. Because industries, maritime traffic, everything that pollutes, in the end, is produced for the final consumer and the final consumer is us. If there is no longer any demand or if the demand is different... I think the solution is in each of us. We really have the power to be the final consumer. Each of our actions, in fact, has an impact on the environment and by modifying our consumption, we will modify the demand, we will modify our means of transport, the way we eat. I know it's difficult. In my daily life, I try to be careful, for example to avoid that what ends up on my plate has travelled halfway around the world. I try to eat locally. These are small things. It's an awareness that, when put together, will really make a big change so that people become aware.

[00:22:07] **Pierre:** To make people aware and, I was going to say 'make the ocean speak', to make people hear, there are many ways to do it. You mentioned scientists for example. And you use photography as a tool. What do you see as the force behind photography? Photography as a way to make people understand?

[00:22:27] **Greg:** For me, photography is really, I would say, a universal means of expression. That is to say that when I take the example of scientists: often they hold speeches that are not necessarily... they don't necessarily use the same vocabulary. Their language is sometimes not understood by the general public or it's a little too complicated. Photography is universal. When you look at it, photography tells a story and there is no need to put words on it. There's no need to put a caption on it. I like, for example, when I do my photo exhibitions, to not put a caption or very few, because for me, the photo tells a story and it is for everyone. Everyone can understand it differently. That may be so. But photography really has a universal language that everyone can understand. And my work is part of what is known as 'popular science'. In other words, I create the link between the scientist and the general public. At least, that's what I try to do by using the power of images.

[00:23:34] **Pierre:** Indeed, in relation to the role you play in making people understand things that are a little complicated. You talk about the ocean, we also sometimes talk about the difficulty of understanding climate change. If I were a young artist or a young photographer...you've talked a lot about your passion, what would you like to share with these young artists or I would call them 'storytellers of the sea', people who can share things with the general public about the importance of protecting the oceans?





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[00:24:11] **Greg:** The message I would like to give them is that in their career, and already at the beginning of their career, they should be doing what they like. If you're a photographer, for example, you have to photograph the species you like. In general, photography is almost an excuse to go and see, observe and understand. Photography allows you to share. It's a way of sharing. It's very important to share as much as possible, especially on the oceans. So, the more ambassadors there are, who will tell the story of the life of the oceans, I think that it will be better for raising awareness.

I believe that by showing the beautiful things of nature, we really become aware. I think that the problem we live in today is that many of us are totally disconnected from nature. We must not forget where we come from. I think there is a big gap, even more so today with social networks, with this new technology. We really live in a virtual world and we forget the basics a little bit. That's the feeling I have today. Social networks allow us to communicate with the greatest number of people. I think that today it's a great force to be reckoned with. But you have to use it wisely. When you go to work with nature, you really have to respect nature. I'm a bit outraged when I see all these people taking selfies. For me, it's like ticking boxes to show that you've done this or that, while you forget to perhaps really live the moment and the communion with nature.

[00:25:52] **Pierre:** If I come back to the Mediterranean itself and perhaps to the underwater part of the Mediterranean. Since it is this part that interests us in particular... Would you have a message for the sea?

[00:26:06] **Greg:** Yes, I would like to send a message. The Mediterranean is poorly known and misunderstood and should be looked at in a different way. At least we should be curious and look at it more closely because it has nothing to envy the other seas of the world. It is a sea that is truly a hotspot of biodiversity. It is not a dead sea. There is a lot of life in the Mediterranean, contrary to what we think.

There is a very special atmosphere when you dive in the Mediterranean. Often when I share my images, especially the images I make offshore, the water is crystal clear, crystal blue. People are quite impressed by the clarity of the water. This is the Mediterranean ecosystem that is vital for our own lives as humans. So, what I would really like is for people to take a closer look at the Mediterranean and try to see it from another angle. I hear a bit too much that people tell me it's the most polluted sea in the world. That it is a sea where there is no life, when this is totally false. There is really a lot to see. I hope that people will act in this direction, with small gestures in their daily lives that will help to breathe new life into the Mediterranean Sea.

[00:27:33] **Pierre:** So our episode ends, we're going slowly back to the surface. Thank you very much Greg for these elements, this journey that has allowed us to discover this passionate profession, this profession passion and your life at sea, your life under the sea. For the listeners: go and see, look at the photos, look at their beauty, their strength and also try to understand the links that you have with the marine ecosystems that are told.

This podcast is brought to you by the members of the coalition and was produced by the production team of *If Oceans Could Speak*, directed by Anna Saito, co-organised by Penny Clarke and Arne Riedel, presented and edited by Stefan Kirchner, Jen Freer, Vera Noon, Agness





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Nohra, Anna Maria Marino, Francisco Lopez Castejon and myself, Pierre Strosser. Thank you for listening to us. We will be back next week with a new story on the Mediterranean which will be in English. There will be a transcript in English if you wish to follow it, which I highly recommend. If the oceans had a voice, what would it tell you?



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