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Think fish think?

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BERMUDA (3 Nov 2006) -- Bermuda features heavily in a new award-winning documentary film series about coral reefs that challenges many commonly held misconceptions of life under the ocean.

'The Reef Series' which includes 'The Perfect Reef', 'The Circle of Life' and 'Talking With Fishes' was produced by husband and wife filmmakers, Guy and Anita Chaumette of Liquid Motion Films.

The couple jetted in from Fiji last week to be on hand at a special Bermuda Institute of Ocean Sciences (BIOS) showing of two of the films at City Hall. Reader advisory: Those of our readers who would prefer to believe that fish don't have feelings or intelligence, should probably stop reading.

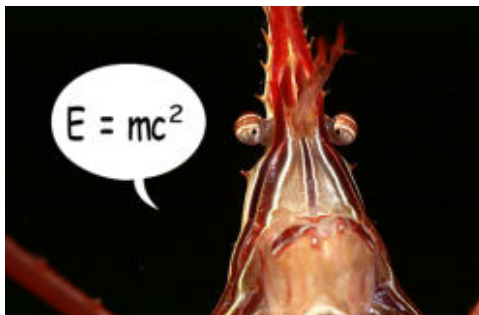
To make The Reef Series, the Chaumettes took an anthropologist approach, looking at the aquatic life, more as separate cultures than separate species.

For example, to film a difficult sequence about squid, the mantra of the day was definitely 'when in the kingdom of squid, do as the squid do'.

"In order to blend with marine life you have to study them and imitate them," said Mr. Chaumette. "You look pretty stupid doing so, but it works with the fish and invertebrates. With squid my method was to hang like they do and extend my hand and mimic their arms and tentacles."

Normally, shy creatures like squid would be scared away by the disturbance from scuba equipment, but the Chaumettes used a semi-closed rebreather. That basically recycles most of the air they breathed underwater. This piece of equipment put out fewer bubbles, and therefore was much quieter underwater.

"That made making mixing with squid a little




Mr. Chaumette is originally from Paris, France and Anita is from Harrogate, Yorkshire, England. They met in the Maldives 11 years ago and were married in England. Now they live wherever their filming takes them. "Guy got into filming in general when he was seven years old," said Mrs. Chaumette. "At that age he was developing photos in the dark room. He travelled around Southeast Asia doing a lot of topside photos and filming. He got carried away with diving and naturally took the cameras underwater."

The Chaumettes aren't marine biologists by training, but have had to learn as much as possible about life in the ocean in order to make the films.

"I had to start learning about it, because the fish are not exactly co-operative," said Mr. Chaumette. "It is not like shooting wildlife on topside. If you want a picture of a tiger, what you do is you set yourself next to a piece of water and you wait until the tiger comes. If you want you can hide, and you can wait as long as you wish.

"Underwater you are limited by time and exposure to the elements. You can't hide. You have to have the marine life respond to you and accept you. In order to do that you have to do a lot of observation first. You have to start learning about marine life and marine biology. It is a growing process."

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bit easier," said Mr. Chaumette.

The couple also had an advantage because it is just the two of them filming, rather than a large film crew to cause even more disruption to the marine eco-system. They do everything themselves from filming, producing and directing to vocals.

To make the films, the couple lived on location, going into the water in the same spot almost every day.

"Although it is difficult to prove, it seemed to us that after awhile the squid started remembering us, and accepted us in the water," said Mr. Chaumette.

"We then managed to be right in the middle of them, filming. It wouldn't be enough to try to camouflage our dive-suits with a particular colour, because squids are cephalopods which are basically colour blind anyway."

Some underwater filmmakers bait the fish, using food to lure large numbers of marine life into a shot. The Chaumettes refuse to do this, because they feel it will upset the delicate balance around them.

In the third film in the series 'Talking with Fishes', the Chaumettes look at whether fish have feelings, and intelligence, and how they can communicate. This is the only film that does not involve marine biologists and scientists.

"The reason why the scientists can't participate in that is because it is very hard to prove, especially in human terms, how fish are communicating," said Mrs. Chaumette. "How do you define fish intelligence? We are showing in our films that they are recognising us. They are coming to us. You give them a sign and they will react to that sign. If you give them another sign and they will react to that in a different way. You can bond with the fish, but it takes a huge amount of time."

In their films, the Chaumette's focus on the beauty and wonder of nature rather than the danger of nature, which has caused them some challenges in the film industry.

"A lot of the major broadcasters just want that fear factor," said Mrs. Chaumette. "They sell that fear factor based on how many people are watching. At the same time have they really given people a choice? I think there is a really big market out there. We have shown our films around the world now and the response has been incredible. People just don't know. People come out for our films."

The Reef Series has won numerous awards, among them a Gold Remi Award from the Houston Festival in 2004, Best Underwater Photography from the International Wildlife Film Festival in Montana in 2004 and Best Director at the International Underwater Film Festival in Slovakia in 2004.

Mr. Chaumette said too many movies and television programmes about shark attacks and crocodile hunting actually promote disrespect and fear of wildlife.

"Nowadays there is too much emphasis on wildlife to get some sensational report on wildlife," said Mr. Chaumette. "These days who is complaining about the killing of the sharks except for Greenpeace and a few educated people?"

Mrs. Chaumette said that she sees nothing dangerous about the work she does filming marine life.

"It is just a matter of knowing the marine life, respecting them and learning about their behaviour," she said. "We try and interact with marine life, but first we study them for months on end."

Mr. Chaumette said a person has a higher chance of being injured on a scooter in Bermuda, than of being harmed by anything in the water.

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