

Behind the lens

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SeaLegacy

DAISY GILARDINI

Behind the Lens places a spotlight on the world's foremost ocean conservation photographers. Each edition focusses on the work of an individual who continues to shape global public opinion through powerful imagery and compelling storytelling.



DAISY GILARDINI

Polar regions photographer and member of the International League of Conservation Photographers and SeaLegacy Collective.

Daisy has spent more than 20 years photographing the polar regions. Her work has been published by, among others, National Geographic and WWF. She has both won and been on the judging panel for BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year.

OCEANOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE (OM): WHEN DID YOU FIRST CONNECT WITH THE OCEAN?

DAISY GILARDINI (DG): I grew up in Switzerland, a mountain paradise, and I start skiing more-or-less at the same time I started walking. My family and I would spend every winter holiday skiing in the mountains. The summer holidays, however, were dedicated to the sea in Italy. I was even more comfortable in the water than I was on skis. I remember spending whole summers playing in the sea and exploring beaches in search of beautiful shells: presents from the ocean.

OM: WHEN DID YOU FIRST PICK UP A CAMERA?

DG: I was 18. Christmas that year, I bought a Nikon for my boyfriend. We took off to Paris for New Year's. We were walking along the gorgeously decorated Champs-Élysées when my boyfriend handed me the camera and said: "Why don't you try to get few shots?" I've haven't put the camera down since!

OM: YOU GREW UP IN SWITZERLAND AND NOW LIVE IN CANADA - TWO COUNTRIES SYNONYMOUS WITH RUGGED NATURE. HAS THE OUTDOORS ALWAYS BEEN A PART OF WHO YOU ARE?

DG: Absolutely! My mother taught me to respect and love nature and wildlife. Growing up, we spent a lot of time outdoors, hiking in the mountains, playing hide-and-seek in the woods behind my home, playing in the sea, or picking berries to make jam.

I spent my childhood in a little village in the countryside with farms all around me. I remember one of my tasks after school was to go to my neighbour's to pick up freshly milked milk. Sometimes I'd drink milk directly from the cow. I would pick up freshly laid eggs, still warm, directly from the hen-house. In the summer, when not at sea, I would help my friends cut the grass and make hay for the cows. We would run barefoot in the fields and jump on the huge piles of hay ready to be stored in the stalls. Ultimately, I grew up with a passion and love for the outdoors. Even during my former career as a financial expert - which forced me to spend a lot of time in the office - I did not miss an opportunity to spend time outside. Spending time in the wilderness became a way of coping with the long hours spent in front of a computer, looking at numbers. Eventually, love brought me to Canada, and when I got married - to a Canadian - there was little doubt where we would live! British Columbia is an extraordinary place.

OM: HOW MUCH HAVE THOSE LANDSCAPES SHAPED YOU AS A PHOTOGRAPHER?

DG: From a young age it was obvious I had a love for animals, so everybody in my family - parents, godparents, aunts - bought me stuffed toys. One in particular influenced my life forever. I was just four years old when I received a little stuffed seal pup toy from my godparents. My mum explained that the seal came from a very cold place and that it lived on and under the polar ice. I was mesmerised by those stories. I dreamed that one day I would be able to see seals in their natural environment.

I grew up with the idea of becoming a veterinarian. But life doesn't always go the way you planned and I ended up becoming a certified expert in finance and accounting instead. After getting my Masters and opening my own accounting firm, and with a good business plan and organisational skills, I managed to match my love for nature, photography and travel with my daily job commitments. It still took me seven years to save the money necessary to realise my childhood dream of seeing seals in their natural habitat, but I got there. In 1997, I was finally able to embark on an expedition to Antarctica - a trip that totally changed my life.

After that, I started taking off on self-assignments for several months a year, and I had to hire an assistant to help me out with the accounting business. But every time I got back to the office, I felt depressed and unfulfilled. I started writing articles and looking for magazines interested in publishing my work. It was like having two full-time jobs. My days would start at 7am and finish at midnight, seven days a week. They say the key to success is to believe in one's ability. Patience, passion and perseverance will lead to success, eventually. By the end I finally succeeded in having my work published. In 2006, I became a full-time photographer.

OM: YOU FIRST VISITED ANTARCTICA IN 1997. AND YOU SAY YOU FELL IN LOVE WITH IT IMMEDIATELY. WHAT IS IT YOU FIND SO ENCHANTING ABOUT THE REGION?

DG: Antarctica is the coldest, driest and windiest continent in the world. I always think of Antarctica as a planet on our planet. It looks as if everything stopped at the time of creation. Everything is in harmony, pristine and pure, probably because no humans ever colonised the continent. It's one of the few places on Earth where animals are not scared of us, where penguins approach you to interact, where seals want to play with you and birds don't fly away. Antarctica is my magic pill for regenerating and rejuvenating!

I tried many times to understand this irresistible attraction to the polar regions, which I would define almost as an addiction or obsession. These extreme adventures transport me out of my ordinary world and lead me on a voyage of self-discovery. The isolation from modern civilisation and all the distractions that comes with it allow me to focus on nature's simple rhythms. The healing feelings of rediscovering our primordial connection with nature and the interconnectivity between all species on Earth, inspires in me a feeling of awareness and deep respect for the importance of these delicate ecosystems.

OM: HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK THAT ANTARCTIC OBSESSIVENESS HAS BEEN TO YOUR SUCCESS IN CAPTURING COMPELLING PHOTOGRAPHY?

DG: The commitment to documenting the polar regions comes from my love and passion for them. My philosophy in life is live your dreams and follow your heart. Specialising, focusing on a particular subject, is not a choice. It's a question of doing what you're most passionate about.

Knowing your subjects, and knowing the ecosystem where they live, is crucial in order to be able to anticipate behaviours and catch the action at the right moment. Returning to the same locations year after year gives you a better understanding of the light conditions. Spending a lot of time with the animals gives you the opportunity to know individuals and come up with something new and different each time. It takes time and knowledge to capture their personalities and freeze - in a single shot, in a fraction of a second - those anthropomorphic expressions that are essential to making a connection with the viewer. Whatever I do, I try to apply my '3Ps' rule to: Passion, patience and perseverance.

OM: IS THAT WHAT SEPARATES AMATEURS FROM PROFESSIONALS?

DG: Absolutely. Commitment and believing in your work makes all the difference.

OM: YOU'VE HAD YOUR WORK FEATURED IN SOME OF THE WORLD'S LEADING PUBLICATIONS WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT STORY YOUR IMAGERY HAS TOLD?

DG: For the last two decades I've concentrated all my photographic efforts to two bodies of work: the polar regions and North American bears (Grizzly, black, polar and Kermode bears). Photography is an extremely powerful tool to deliver messages. It's the only universal language, understood by everybody, no matter which country you're from, no matter your language or level of education. I feel privileged every time I'm in the field and I'm grateful for every minute I can spend with wildlife, because this gives me the opportunity to share their stories by giving them a voice. So every time one of my images touches a viewer's heart and generates some kind of emotion, I believe I've told an important story - no matter whether the images were seen in a prestigious publication or on social media.

That said, in 2015 BBC Wildlife Magazine published a full feature on the Kermode bears that raised awareness of the challenges these animals and their habitat are facing. In 2016, 'Motherhood', one of my polar bear images, was awarded the Grand Prize at the Windland Smith Rice Nature's Best Awards and was exhibited for a full year at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum in Washington, DC, together with a video. I was thrilled and felt personally proud of the recognition, but the most important thing to me is that the image reached seven million viewers and raised awareness of the issues that polar bears face with habitat loss due to climate change. Ultimately, being published or awarded is not just about giving a voice to places and species that are at risk. It's about being an ambassador for nature.

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OM: WHAT'S THE MOST IMPORTANT STORY YOU HAVEN'T YET TOLD?

DG: The story about how humankind was successful in saving our planet.

OM: YOU SAY EXPEDITIONS TO THE WORLD'S REMOTE PLACES LEAD YOU ON A "VOYAGE OF SELF-DISCOVERY". WHAT IS IT THAT YOU'VE LEARNED ABOUT YOURSELF?

DG: I learned that I am just a tiny little element in the much larger universe. Consequently, this taught me humility. I came to realise my own life is interconnected with the life of all other living creatures on Earth, plants or animals. Respecting nature also means respecting myself and humankind. I learned that I love nature for its beauty, and I learned to be grateful for every single day of my life. All these realisations pushed me to redirect my life priorities. I switched my career in the financial world, which was focused on material wealth, to a career in conservation photography, where I could focus on being an ambassador for nature.

My passion for the natural world has become a lifelong commitment to conservation messaging and inspiring respect for the natural world, while at the same time reminding people of the need to preserve our fragile planet. It's extremely exciting and fulfilling to give a new and meaningful purpose to one's life. If humankind wants to survive and evolve with our planet, we have to act responsibly. We need to realise, with humility, that nature is not dependent on us but we are dependent on nature.

OM: YOU'VE PHOTOGRAPHED A NUMBER OF APEX PREDATORS. WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE ON SUCH SHOTS, AND HAVE YOU EVER FELT IN DANGER?

DG: Generally, I think if fear comes into play it means something's wrong in your approach to the situation or subject. I visited Madagascar twice - in 1993 and ten years later in 2003. During my first visit I almost lost my life from food poisoning and malaria at the same time. On my second visit, in 2003, I got malaria again, despite taking the medical prophylaxis both times. Mosquitos simply love me. This is probably one of the reasons I turned into a polar photographer!

As far as wildlife interactions, I've only felt uncomfortable on a couple of occasions - once while in close proximity to a young, curious polar bear, and once with a mother grizzly bear and her two cubs. In both situations, the bears used body language to let me know I was crossing their boundaries. My immediate reaction, based on respect, was to re-establish distance. On both occasions I was able to continue the shoot in peace.

I believe the best approach to wildlife photography is to photograph animals on their own terms. This means positioning yourself in their environment, and letting them decide if they want to interact with you. When they accept you as part of their environment, they will reveal their personalities. In order to get intimate portraits of wildlife, you have to be patient and never force the situation.

OM: WHAT ABOUT CHALLENGES REGARDING EXTREME ENVIRONMENTS?

DG: As a wildlife photographer specialised in the polar regions the challenges in the field are mostly related to the extreme environment where I operate. Extreme cold is a challenge for your equipment as well as for your body. First you have to take care of yourself in order not to freeze, and that includes your extremities - face, hands and feet being the most exposed. Dressing in layers and avoiding perspiration are vital to survive in these situations. Once you're comfortable, then comes the technical challenge of operating a camera with huge gloves. Finally you have to work around the fact that, after a while, parts of the camera will freeze - batteries first, then the control panels and the big back monitor. So you must be skilled enough to work your camera in blind mode and remember the setting you started with. The trick is to keep shooting and hope for the best.

I learned the hard way. While on assignment documenting a skiing expedition to the North Pole in 2009, I got hypothermia and I had to be helicoptered back to base camp. I had made a series of mistakes that led me to rapidly lose body heat. It was a humbling experience.

OM: WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES YOU FACE AS A MODERN CONSERVATION PHOTOGRAPHER?

DG: I think some of the most difficult situations a wildlife photographer has to face today come from the business side. With the internet and the advent of micro-stock, the market has never been so compromised. Everybody's looking for free or super low-cost images, without taking into consideration integrity and ethical photography - values that, unfortunately, are becoming rarer all the time. Nowadays wildlife and nature photography is an extremely competitive field, where the word "ethics" sometimes - too often - gets lost.

The use of captive animals and baiting wild ones in order to get the 'perfect' shot has become normal practice, sadly. In some cases, photographing captive animals can serve a specific conservation purpose, but it must be governed by strong, ethical rules about the welfare of the animal, and should always be captioned as so.

As a nature photographer, what I do inevitably has an impact on the places and the creatures I am documenting. It's essential to limit any impact I have to a minimum, in the hope that the positive influence my images will have in raising awareness is greater than the consequences of my intrusions.

And, last but certainly not least, the digital manipulation of images has become such a serious issue that the authenticity of every picture - and the integrity of the photographer - is always questioned. It's our responsibility as nature photographers to caption our images clearly and honestly, and indicate any composite work or alterations. Digital manipulation can be a great, creative and wonderful form of art - as long as you're transparent and honest with what you're doing with your images.

OM: DO YOU THINK WE, AS A SPECIES, HAVE EVER BEEN MORE DISCONNECTED FROM THE NATURAL WORLD THAN WE ARE TODAY?

DG: Humankind absolutely has never been so disconnected from nature as it is nowadays. I am the person I am because of the core values I acquired during my childhood. The time spent walking barefoot in the woods, and the time I spent with farm animals. Those experiences are all a part of who I am today. There are many scientific studies that prove that leading an outdoor life, in connection with nature, is healthier, both physically and mentally. It helps reduce blood pressure and stress, and it enhances creativity.

OM: WHAT CAN PEOPLE DO TO RECONNECT?

DG: Spend more time outside and try to connect with nature. If you live in a city, have lunch under a tree; try to organise business meetings on a bench in a park, if possible. Take your coffee break outside. Walk barefoot on a beach or on the grass. Enjoy the warmth of the sun on your face. Listen to the birds. Listen to the waves. Pay attention to the wind touching your skin. Engage with other forms of life. Little things can go far.

OM: HOW EMPOWERING HAS SOCIAL MEDIA BEEN FOR CONSERVATION PHOTOGRAPHERS?

DG: The digital age, together with social media, has opened the door for wildlife and conservation photographers, as well as scientists, to a greater degree than ever before. Technology and internet platforms now allow us to reach more people, in more places, faster, more efficiently and effectively, than at any time in human history. We're living in the information age. And while problems such as climate change, pollution and environmental decline might seem insurmountable, we're better placed than at any time in history to spread a message of hope.

OM: WHAT IMPACT DO YOU HOPE THAT HAS?

DG: I think that if we are where we are at this point in time, it's because of ignorance. Ignorance is the enemy. The technology and communication available today will help us counter that. Education is the key.

OM: WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE POLAR REGIONS?

DG: The polar regions face a lot of challenges, both now and in the future, with climate change and rising temperatures, especially in the Arctic. Increased development opportunities, due to the opening of new sea lanes through the ice, will put a lot more pressure on the environment, with marine-transport pollution, exploitation of newly accessible natural resources, and the risk of ocean acidification. While Antarctica is - for now - protected by the Antarctic Treaty, the potential for geopolitical conflict in the Arctic is not to be discounted.

OM: WHAT'S NEXT FOR YOU?

DG: I will continue documenting changes in the polar regions, adding to my body of work with upcoming assignments in the Canadian Arctic, Svalbard in Norway, Greenland and, of course, beautiful Antarctica.



Antarctic Peninsula
The golden hour in the polar regions. The hues that decorate the sky and landscape at this time make the early starts worthwhile. "Even if it's sometimes hard, it always pays off in the end."



Antarctic Peninsula
Life above and below the waterline is very much intertwined in the Antarctic. An underwater camera housing and dome port allow split captures such as this.



Antarctic Peninsula
Weddell seals come on land to rest and digest after spending time in the water fishing. Occasionally they wake up. Their yawns look like laughing fits.



Antarctic Peninsula
Adelie and Emperor penguins are the only two species of penguin to breed along the entire Antarctic coast - including the Peninsula. Here, an Adelie penguin braces itself against the snow and wind.



Svalbard, Norway
Polar bears are at the top of the Arctic food chain. They are the only truly carnivorous bears. Seals make up 90 percent of their diet. Here, a polar bear sniffs the air for prey.



Wapusk National Park, Canada
A polar bear patiently waits for the pack ice to form in the Hudson Bay area. Once the ice is formed he will venture out to hunt seals.



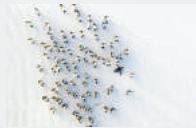
Wapusk National Park, Canada
Two young males spar on the coast of Hudson Bay in Manitoba, Canada. Playfights are common, and it is good practice for more serious standoffs that take place during mating season.



Wapusk National Park, Canada
The bond between mother and offspring, and between sibling and sibling, is very strong. It's the only social structure among normally solitary polar bears to be recognised and identified by scientists.



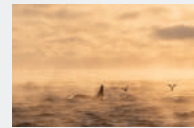
Quebec, Canada
Harp seal pups are born on sea ice from late February to March. At birth, they are covered in a beautiful white coat that will last for only a couple of weeks.



Falkland Islands
A group of King penguins gather on the beach at Volunteer Point before heading out to sea to feed.



Antarctic Peninsula
A Gentoo penguin colony buffeted by a big spring snowstorm on Pleneau Island.



Svalbard Norway
This image is the furthest north a pod of orcas have been sighted and photographed hunting among the ice floes - 80°33" North (Shot in April 2018).



Snow Hill Island, Antarctica
Emperor penguins are the only penguins to breed during the Antarctic winter (April to August), facing temperatures as low as -40C.

Behind the lens

DAISY GILARDINI

Born in Switzerland, Daisy has always had a love of the outdoors. For many years she juggled an amateur passion for travel and photography with her role as a business owner. Eventually, she became a full-time conservation photographer, specialising on the planet's polar regions. Her images have been featured by esteemed publishers such as National Geographic, Smithsonian and the BBC. She is a member of the International League of Conservation Photographers, part of the SeaLegacy Collective, and a member of the Explorers Club.

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