Jean-Michel Cousteau, the son of beloved oceanographer Jacques Cousteau, works with children Celine and Fabien to continue the family legacy.

Beneath the Surface

Jacques Cousteau's family follows disparate currents in its attempts to save the world's oceans.

It has been three decades since The Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau *ran on PBS, but this year, Jacques' son Jean-Michel, 68, and his grandchildren, Fabien, 37, and Celine, 32, will be starring in several underwater TV specials of their own. The second- and third-generation Cousteaus are all adventurers who continue to sound the warning so bluntly phrased by Grandpere Jacques: "The oceans are dying." Upcoming shows will tell of the plight of the gray whales—a 600,000-year-old endangered species—and offer a new twist on old horror stories by showing how the sharks are the real victims.*

Behind the cameras, however, the Cousteau family has struggled to overcome internal rifts. Upon Jacques' death in 1997, the family empire became the property of his second wife, Francine; a woman Jean-Michel has described as "my out-of-step-mother." Jean-Michel's brother, Philippe, died in a seaplane crash in 1979, and his two children, Philippe and Alexandra, and their mother, Jan, run their own foundation in Washington. Although it shares many goals with Jean-Michel's Ocean Futures Society, the two groups do not work together. Jean-Michel and his children spoke with Worth *features editor Jan Alexander about life in a fishbowl.*

The work of the Cousteau Society, the nonprofit organization your father started to protect ocean life, has splintered into two separate family-run groups working toward similar goals. Would it help your mission to combine resources?

Jean-Michel: When my father passed away, the Cousteau Society was kept alive by his second wife. My understanding is that all of the television programs have been sold out to other organizations, so the Cousteau Society manages only the name and a few of the assets. But since my father passed away, they've produced nothing.

My nephew (Philippe) and niece (Alexandra) named their foundation the Philippe Cousteau Foundation, after their father. Unfortunately, it is no longer called that because my stepmother sued them, and they had to change the name [to EarthEcho International]. I felt that was very, very nasty and uncalled for. But I have nothing to do with that, unfortunately, and I feel sorry for them. Philippe is in his 20s and will do important things. As far as my niece, I don't know anymore what she is doing, because she is involved in several different things.

Fabien: From the last update I heard, she's in South America right now with her fiancé, or he might be her husband at this point.

Jean-Michel: I know that whatever they do is for a good cause, and in that sense, I'm very supportive. I don't feel that working together is necessary, as long as there's a common goal to help, protect, manage and save the ocean. We probably could reach out to more people and make sure we don't overlap, but I think we're trying to avoid that. The Cousteau Society, to me, is a defunct thing; it's a thing of the past. I'm not interested in the past, I'm interested in the future. But my nephew and my niece, I think they can help a lot.

Celine: If we were to join forces, yes, that would probably make for a stronger impact, but this is where we go back to pressure in the family. Each person needs to be an individual, as well part of the family. They are welcome to do things with us if they choose to. We are friendly when we see each other. If anything, we don't know each other very well.

It happens among cousins.

Celine: It does. It's no secret, my grandfather, my dad and all that—it happens in other families—it's just that ours happens to be printed in the newspaper, so it all of a sudden becomes a big deal.

Jacques Cousteau used to call himself the "man-fish." Did you grow up feeling like mermen and mermaids?

Jean-Michel: When I was a teenager, my dad was working on underwater habitats, diving physiology and submersibles. When it was time for me to decide what I was going to do in life, I thought there might be a very strong market in the future for underwater cities and villages, so I decided to become an architect. But when you think "Where do I learn marine architecture?" there are no schools for that. So I went to regular architecture school. Later, I did my military service in Madagascar, which was more like being in the Peace Corps. There I did exercise my profession, building schools, but I was diving, diving, diving all along. And then, in 1967, my dad asked me if I could help him organize some expedition in that region. That was like putting my finger into a grinder. One thing led to another, and I ended up,

CARRIE VONDERHAAR, OCEAN FUTURES

particularly after my brother passed away, in film production.

Fabien: We were able to travel in some fantastic places: the Amazon, Papua New Guinea, Australia. It does something to one's soul to be opened up to all of these experiences. It's a fantastic and magical world. The flip side is there are a lot of things going on that are not so rosy and peachy. You can't ignore that. Especially in terms of our family, you can't turn your back on environmental devastation. It's part of our responsibility as Cousteaus to be the voice of the ocean, so to speak. I studied environmental economics in college. My idea was to bridge the gap between the economic realities of human society and the environmental problems.

But at the same time, growing up with a famous grandfather and a famous father, you're always challenging yourself, and being OK is not good enough. The pressure doesn't come from anywhere else but from within. At the end of the day, if you're doing what you want and need to do—in a way that is respecting the legacy and philosophy you've grown up with—you can't help but be in the right. You just have to do it twice as well as anybody else.

Celine: It was never forced upon us to go into the family business; I hate to call it a business, because it's hardly that, but it really was so much a part of our life to be out there exploring and bringing that back to people. We were just infused with it whether we knew it or not. Both my brother and I went our own ways, though. I have a bachelor's in psychology and a master's in international and intercultural management. Through that, I've always traveled. I've always loved adventure, diving, horseback riding, rock climbing. But bit by bit, it all came back to the ocean.

Growing up, in great part thanks to our mother, we were made to feel we weren't any different than anybody else. Our grandfather wanted us to come on expeditions and be the kids on camera, but our mom said, "Education first. If they want to travel with you in the summer, that's fine." Sometimes we'd say, "Hey look, there's Grandpa on TV. I haven't seen him since last Christmas." We weren't glued to the TV, but after school I would go down to the editing room and see what they were working on. Our mother, Anne-Marie Cousteau, was an expedition photographer, so I would look at her photos and hear stories from the crew members. For me, that was the story.

So family business or not, saving the oceans turned out to be a family mission.

Jean-Michel: Well, we run a not-for-profit organization, the Ocean Futures Society, and I worked for my dad with a not-for-profit organization. Before we became a not-for-profit, we were always broke, which was no different from now.

But Jacques Cousteau made millions for his role as coinventor of the Aqua-Lung, the underwater breathing apparatus.

Jean-Michel: It was always put back into exploration expeditions. And we've always done that and will continue to do that. If you approach things as a business, you do nothing that we do.

In the first of your new series (which aired on PBS in April) the cameras panned debris that washed up on nearly uninhabited Hawaiian islands. You must have recalled your father's direst warnings.

Jean-Michel: Absolutely. When I was a kid, I saw my own backyard, which was the Mediterranean Sea along the French Riviera, being depleted and trashed. Most people still don't really understand that wherever we are, we are connected to the ocean in more than one way. Our quality of life is connected to the quality of the ocean. And it's not limited just to the debris; it also has to do with chemicals and heavy metals and fertilizers, which we don't see but affect the marine environment. And then it goes on: destruction of the coastal habitats that are the nurseries of the majority of all forms of marine life. It has to do with the way that we overharvest the ocean. There are 92 species of commercial fish that are endangered and probably won't make it. Unless we treat nature like we treat business . . . I know it sounds harsh and not very romantic, but if we don't do that, we are heading toward bankruptcy.

Do you eat seafood?

Jean-Michel: I eat seafood, but not deep-sea fish such as swordfish, orange roughy and Chilean sea bass, which are in danger of being overfished. I also don't eat filter feeders, such as oysters, clams and mussels, because I know what's in them, nor shrimp, which are loaded with antibiotics. The Monterey Bay Aquarium in California has a Seafood Watch campaign that publishes information on what species are sustainable and good choices to eat, and what should be avoided, either because they are endangered or have mercury contamination.

The solution to endangerment is that we need to start farming herbivore fish, not carnivores that upset the balance. When you farm salmon, for example, you feed it other fish, and you need seven pounds of fish to make one pound of salmon. Tilapia and catfish are some of the herbivores that should be farmed massively. That rules out some of the tastiest entrees in some of the best restaurants, and then there is that Asian delicacy, shark's fin soup.

Celine: One thing that really gets to me is a vivid image of a fishing boat catching sharks, cutting the fins off and throwing them back to die. It's disgusting. Then again, it's not just about wanting to save sharks. You have to deal with cultural issues—go ask anyone

who is used to eating something that is a delicacy and say they can't eat it anymore. But you have to put limits on it.

JEAN-MICHEL: The prices I saw in the chic restaurants in Shanghai last year were around $68 for one order of shark's fin soup. Now we're finding out that shark fins have 42 times more mercury than would be allowed by the Food and Drug Administration. Also, shark fishing is eliminating a very important family of predators who are doing a very critical job in the environment. By eating the dead animals, the sick ones, the weak ones, sharks keep the ocean healthy. Without them, you can imagine what the ocean can become—a cesspool.

Are too many yachts and diving enthusiasts problematic for the environment?

JEAN-MICHEL: It has to do with the education they receive. No one other than divers and snorkelers see what is below the surface. As a result, we should consider ourselves responsible reporters about what is happening in that environment. We have a responsibility that, unfortunately, is not taught in diving classes or by diver certification agencies. I have been campaigning for the past 20 to 30 years to make it mandatory that people, as part of their certification, understand the environmental problems so that they can appreciate what they're going to explore. But unfortunately, it's not there.

Can those who have yachts and love the sea also be stewards of it?

JEAN-MICHEL: They can join the International Seakeepers Society, which provides ocean monitoring sensors to members' sea vessels. The sensors gather and transmit findings via satellite to scientists. They can examine ocean conditions, shifts in climate and sources of pollution. Data goes to weather forecasters, government agencies and ocean research institutes. W