



GOOD WILL HUNTING

Bridging the gap between advocacy and entertainment, Ashlan and Philippe Cousteau, Jr., elevate the art of storytelling for the 21st century.

By SARAH FONES

PHOTOS COURTESY OF ASHLAN AND PHILIPPE COUSTEAU

Following a six-year lull, piracy is again on the rise off the Somali coast, ostensibly fueled by lowered communal vigilance and heightened complacency. According to a report issued by Oceans Beyond Piracy (OBP), kidnapping-for-ransom attacks have escalated recently, underscoring the threat of renewed violence in a region plagued by debilitating poverty.

While the news won't generate the type of titillating headlines guaranteed to draw eyeballs and clicks,

this change is exactly the sort of thing worth paying attention to, according to Ashlan and Philippe Cousteau, Jr.

Speaking to *Mission* from Los Angeles, Philippe, grandson of Aqua Lung cofounder and legendary explorer Jacques, begins rattling off statistics—a habit that he readily concedes may not endear him to everyone.

Citing the tens of billions of dollars piracy costs the global economy every year, the scourge's near two-decades-long duration, and its links to terrorist

groups like al-Shabab and al-Qaeda in the Maghreb, Philippe wonders whether putting a few million dollars toward fishery conservation could avoid all this.

“We need to do a better job, I believe, of connecting the dots, so that we're recognizing that these issues affect all of us—Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, liberals, Libertarians—it doesn't matter,” he says. “These are fundamental issues of food, security, economic growth, human rights.”

Adventurers and entrepreneurs who also play integral roles at the nonprofit EarthEco International (which Philippe cofounded in honor of his late father), Philippe and Ashlan are in a unique position to connect those dots. Consider the latest season of their Travel Channel series *Caribbean Pirate Treasure*, which took them to an uninhabited island in Belize.

There, on the island's windward side, the couple witnessed the buildup of nearly eight feet of plastic pollution, accumulated from seemingly all over the world. This, along with a distinct lack of once-populous large fish, made an indelible impression on them.

Overfishing, Ashlan explains, often goes hand in hand with indentured servitude—and is directly linked to the murky path from ocean to dinner table. She cuts to the chase. “A lot of times the humans on those boats are being forced to work, and it's usually slave labor,” the former E! News journalist says matter-of-factly. “So when you're buying a piece of fish that's caught from a sketchy source, you don't realize that you're actually probably funding human trafficking.”

Linking something as mundane as a grocery purchase to slave labor may be an unconventional means of raising awareness, but it's a potentially impactful one. Younger generations, and environmentally conscious shoppers, in particular, are apt to navigate store aisles with a moral compass, their ethical concerns taking precedence.

The Cousteaus recognize the imperative to reach as broad an audience as possible, connecting oceanic and environmental issues to bigger themes like global security and the economy that directly affect large swaths of the public. Having recently met privately with lawmak-



ers on Capitol Hill, Philippe says he and Ashlan left feeling that such issues were not being adequately addressed and communicated to constituents. He notes the displacement of mass populations—the millions of Syrians fleeing that country’s devastating civil war, for example, or the estimated 100 million people all over the world who will be forced from their homes because of rising sea levels by century’s end. Not only is climate change real, it’s affecting every one of us right now and threatening global stability. “As we get bogged down in these debates (Is it happening? Is it not happening?), we’re giving far too much credence to the Flat Earthers and deniers that exist out there,” Philippe says.

One of the keys to building awareness and actually getting people interested, the couple contend, is through great storytelling. Conveying a message—and having it truly resonate—means touching on what is relevant to a specific audience, be it their health, children, or job security. “One thing that we always try to do is reach outside of the converted—try to talk to people who aren’t going to go to an oceans conference,

people that think differently than us and other people that we know,” Ashlan explains. When it comes to doing so successfully, the fact that the Cousteaus are also absurdly telegenic—attractive, articulate, and down-to-earth—doesn’t hurt.

The two met in 2010 in Los Angeles at an environmental conference, where Philippe was speaking about the catastrophic BP oil spill that had occurred earlier that year. Urged to attend by a girlfriend, Ashlan, then an E! red carpet reporter, was soon glad that she did.

Once she and Philippe locked eyes, they were immediately attracted to each other. They soon began dating, eventually marrying in two ceremonies in France in 2013, one of which took place at the same city hall where Philippe’s parents had married.

Raised in L.A., Philippe grew up with the Pacific practically in his backyard. Instilled with a love for the ocean that has only grown over time, he says, he was able to live vicariously through the work of his father and grandfather, ultimately

expanding upon it while simultaneously carving out his own niche.

Like Philippe, North Carolina native Ashlan always enjoyed a proximity to water, whether it was lying poolside or traipsing along a stream. She readily immersed herself in nature. “I spent my afternoons as a kid running around the woods and playing with sticks and floating my Barbie down the creek,” she remembers, perhaps presaging her career as an oceanic adventurer.

The pair currently fill a modern multimedia role and are involved in various projects, ranging from a tongue-in-cheek online series with CNN’s *Great Big Story*, to syndicated Saturday-morning kids’ shows, to more serious-minded documentaries. They’re also at work on a virtual-reality series, Philippe says, and looking into producing scripted programming.

Speaking about audiences today and the seemingly infinite options, Philippe harkens back to a less bountiful viewing era, some 40-odd years ago. There were maybe just half a dozen channels on television. “When my grandfather was making films, your audience came to you,” Philippe points out. “And what’s really

different today about media is that you have to go to your audience.”

Never let it be said that the Cousteaus aren’t willing to go the distance, literally or metaphorically. Having traveled the world, often together, the couple say collaboration and respect drive the relationship, balancing out roles that become almost intuitive.

They take note of each other’s energy, make time for themselves, and also try not to take themselves too seriously. Ashlan, a self-confessed gear head, isn’t afraid to indulge in a car metaphor or two when elaborating: “It’s hard because some days I’m the gas and Philippe’s the brake. We both are really creative people.”

That isn’t to say they don’t have their differences, particularly when it comes to their work in front of the camera. “I speak in very short, to-the-point sound bites,” Ashlan says. “I take the things that need the short answer, and Philippe takes the things that need the long answer.”

Here, Philippe interjects, as if on cue. “Or I’m going to jump in and give a long answer. We’re well matched.”
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