

# Doug Allan

*Underwater Cinematographer*

Text by Alison Barrat  
Photos courtesy of Doug Allan and  
Khaled bin Sultan Living Oceans  
Foundation

**You might know Doug Allan because of his spectacular cinematography. In his 30-year filming career, he's been involved with over 60 films and series, and has worked for BBC, Discovery, National Geographic and many others, filming on series such as *The Blue Planet*, *Planet Earth*, *Human Planet* and *Frozen Planet*. His photographic awards include seven Emmy's and four BAFTA's. He has twice won the underwater category in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year and was awarded the Royal Geographical Society's Cherry Kearton Medal for his wildlife images. Last year, he was made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Photographic Society.**

Or, maybe you're familiar with his work in Antarctica. He spent eight years down south as a research diver, scientist, and photographer for the British Antarctic Survey (BAS), before changing direction to full time filming in 1985. He has three honorary doctorates in recognition of his camerawork, as well as two Polar Medals.

But you probably won't know Allan for his views on being hugged by a Walrus, why he gives Svalbard airport café a wide berth, or what he thinks about making films on ocean conservation. Read on to find out what Allan has to say about these as well as some of his other stories.

**AB:** *You've said that your early career ambitions were to work "underwater, anywhere". What attracted you to diving?*

**DA:** I was drawn to the water in the 60's when quite honestly there were two frontiers. There was space and the ocean, and they were talked about in the same

paragraph. I couldn't go into space, but anyone could go underwater.

Back then, underwater was a much more foreign environment than it is now. I read *The Silent World* [by Jacques-Yves Cousteau] when I was 11 or 12, and it really fired me up with that sense of underwater adventure. It was exciting and romantic, and I liked the idea of get-

ting close to dangerous animals. Classic things that would attract a wee boy.

**AB:** *Are those the same reasons you went to be a research diver in Antarctica?*

**DA:** When I graduated as a biologist, I didn't want to be a full on scientist. I wanted to help scientists underwater





back then—and we're talking about the days of telex, a very slow and cumbersome form of communication—messages had to be practical, to do with issues on base. We were only allowed to send out 100 words of personal news every month and receive 100 words back each month.

Today, most of the bases have email, so you can pretty much send as much text as you want. I think that would be too much communication for me. Because the problem is that the really good emails would tend to make me long for home, and the really depressing news from 'the real world' would make me sad because there's nothing you can do because you are isolated.

I think if you can't physically get back, then you're actually better if you mentally can't get back there either. But this is an oldie speaking, not a digital native!

*AB: You first started filmmaking in Antarctica, how did you get into it?*

DA: I became very interested in photography during my first three winters, but then at the end of my third winter, we had a film crew come on the base, including David Attenborough. They were there for just a day, and through that day, I helped them around the island and took their camera-man underwater.

It was while talking to them that I realized that there was this job called a wildlife cameraman that checked all the boxes I was enjoying—diving, travel, animals, excitement, worthwhile cause. That's where the germ started. That's where I thought that I should consider shooting movies rather than stills.

So I decided I would take a movie camera down on my next winter in Antarctica. Before I

because I simply felt I was a better diver than many of them. Back in those days, it was slightly unusual for scientists to dive, and I had been working as a pearl diver in Scotland and as a diver in the central Sudanese Red Sea, so when the vacancy for a diver in Antarctica came up, I didn't think too much about it, I just applied.

I was offered a one year contract to take the place of somebody who had left. Normally, when you go to the Antarctic you get the job about June or July and then you go to a big

conference in Cambridge to learn about BAS and meet all the other people who have jobs in the Antarctic. But I bypassed all that completely, and when I arrived on base, I had only been to Cambridge for about a week, then flown down to the bottom of South America and been on a ship for four days. I arrived on the base on one morning, and the following day, the ship left for the winter. We wouldn't see any other people for nine months.

*AB: You spent five winters in*

*Antarctica. How do you cope with that type of isolation?*

DA: The most isolated place was a base called Halley, and I got a chance to be the base commander there. The 16 of us on the base were isolated for 11 months; we only got one ship during the year. There's no exposed rock for 150 miles, and the sun doesn't come above the horizon for 100 days.

I think the whole BAS experience is great if you hit it at the right time in your life. If you're the

right kind of person to be there, then there's nothing else like it—you don't really notice the isolation, or if you do, then it's something that you take on and almost thrive under. But I have to say that the isolation back then was very different from now.

The Antarctic is still physically isolated, but we were quite cut off with regard to communication. Because



Allan diving with camera



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ness made for a very dramatic sequence.

I always remember that one in terms of being a real groundbreaker. Then, on the other hand, the time I spent with the emperor penguins in the water for *Blue Planet*—that was really special as well.

But I have to say the pick of my underwater polar sequences is probably the polar bears swimming, which I did for the BBC wildlife special just called *Polar Bear*, back in

Allan with underwater camera under the ice in the Canadian Arctic; Emperor penguins and three-week-old chicks, photo by Doug Allan (left)

'96-97. We got these lovely underwater shots of polar bears swimming. For a couple of shots, I was in the water with them, but the loveliest takes were with a remote camera held over the side of the boat and working with a very cooperative polar bear. He let us get really close while he was paddling through the water.

*AB: So have you had any close calls while filming underwater?*

*DA: Well a walrus grabbed me when I was snorkelling off the ice edge in the Arctic. I had just finished taking some still shots of some murre diving, and I was treading water vertically. Suddenly, something had me around the waist and was holding me really, really tightly. It was a complete surprise; this was a classic attack, no warning what-*



went, I contacted the BBC and asked was anyone interested in the footage I might come back with? A producer said he was, and so when I was down there, I filmed the emperor penguins.

When I came back, I showed him the footage. He liked it. He bought some and asked me to go down for the following summer to shoot stuff for his upcoming series about birds. So when *Birds for All Seasons* came on TV in 1985, I had my foothold. You could say the first commercial piece of movie photography that I shot was in 1983 when I did the emperor penguins.

I then wrote up a couple of ideas that I had about films, which you could do in the Antarctic winter. I persuaded Survival Anglia to commission them and went into full time filmmaking in 1986.

*AB: What is the best thing that you have filmed underwater in Antarctica or the Arctic?*

*DA: Wow, that's a hard call, but we did do leopard seals hunting Adele penguins for the BBC's *Life in the Freezer*. It was the first time leopard seals had been filmed underwater.*

I was always fairly confident that we could do it. But in those days, a lot of people believed that leopard seals were very dangerous. In reality, the seals were actually quite approachable in the water, and that close-



Allan being handed his camera in a hole in the ice

so-ever. I looked down and literally tucked underneath my arm there was a head of a walrus. I hit him on the head, hard, with the camera; he let go and swam away a couple of meters and looked at me. By that time I was swimming hard for the ice edge and pulling myself out, so the whole thing lasted seconds. But that's exactly how walrus

attack seals.

Sometimes they shift their diet from mussels to seals, hunting them when the seals are sleeping at the surface. The walrus dive down and look up from under water, see the seals, grab them, and take them down. If that walrus' reaction to being hit on the head had been to sink down with me, that would have been it. They kill the seals by either squeezing them very tightly and

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crushing them, or the walrus puts his lips on the seal's head and sucks his brains out. So it was just luck really that he didn't do either of those things to me.

As an aside to that, as wildlife

filmmakers we go into situations on land or in the water where certainly there's the potential for things to get dangerous. But I think ... that our experience, gained from the amount of time



Beluga whales, photo by Doug Allan

Allan filming hump-back whale and calf in Tonga

we get to spend with the animals, means that we can recognize when their mood changes, and at that stage, you just back off. There's no point in getting injured or bitten. That usually brings the shoot to a halt, and that's just frustrating and daft. After all, you're there to do a job, and to be unnecessarily injured is just a bit pointless really.

*AB: You've recently written a book called Freeze Frame about your experiences filming in the Arctic and Antarctica. Why did you write a book?*

DA: I think I've always enjoyed the different media—television, radio and books. Of the three, television actually gives you the least information output. It aims to swamp you with visuals. Radio is better, and books are best of all. And I like talking to people, talking to schools. People ask me about my adventures, and I knew there were a lot of things I wanted to offer, information to give out about my career and animals, who I am, and how you film and various things like that. So, I'd been thinking about a book for quite a long time.

I decided to do it in the form of short stories. Of course, that was much easier to write than a big long linear book. You can open mine anywhere and read a little story. And I wanted it so that within the stories there would be at least one or two moments where you would say, "Well I didn't know that."

And it can be all kinds of "didn't know that"—maybe a wee fact about a polar bear, or a different way of thinking about an ethical issue that comes up when you're filming. How close



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can you go? How do you take such a shot? How do you live in the Antarctic for two and half years without women and come away quite sane? What was it like shooting film when you didn't see the results until you came back? All these little sort of things are just answered piece by piece through the book. Writing it was one of the biggest bits of fun I've ever had, and I hope that comes through. Me, my editor Roz, and my designer, Simon—those were the only people involved. Great.

*AB: You reveal quite a lot about yourself in the book. How did you choose which personal moments to include?*

DA: What I did when I started, I had this idea to write all these short stories. I literally sat up one night in bed about 2:00 AM, and

I thought, "I know what some of these stories are going to be." So I just wrote down the one-liners that reminded me about all of these things.

I wanted to wear my heart on my sleeve and open up a little bit, too, and I didn't find that difficult at all. In some respect, it was wonderfully liberating. When you don't have to write an introduction to anything, you can just go right into the story. It's almost like doing standup comedy or being on a talk show. Give them the facts, make them laugh, make them sigh, make them gasp! That's what I like about it. But it's up to the reader to choose—it's what makes the book different.

The best review that I got was in *Wanderlust* magazine, who said, "The most fascinating thing about *Freeze Frame* is that you can feel Doug's personality and passion

come singing through when you read the stories. Like the man himself, this book is a one off." I thought that was great. Very flattering.

*AB: You like making people laugh. What are the funniest moments that you've spent filming or diving?*

DA: One of the funniest was when I was coming back off of a shoot in Svalbard, in the Norwegian Arctic. I had been in the field for a long time, and we'd been held up by bad weather. We just had time to get all the gear packed, fling it in the car and drive to the airport. Back in those days, there were only two or three flights a week back to Norway.

We got all the gear checked in with very little time to spare. We had just a few minutes, and

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Allan on a shoot in French Polynesia; Allan filming sealion in Galapagos (below)

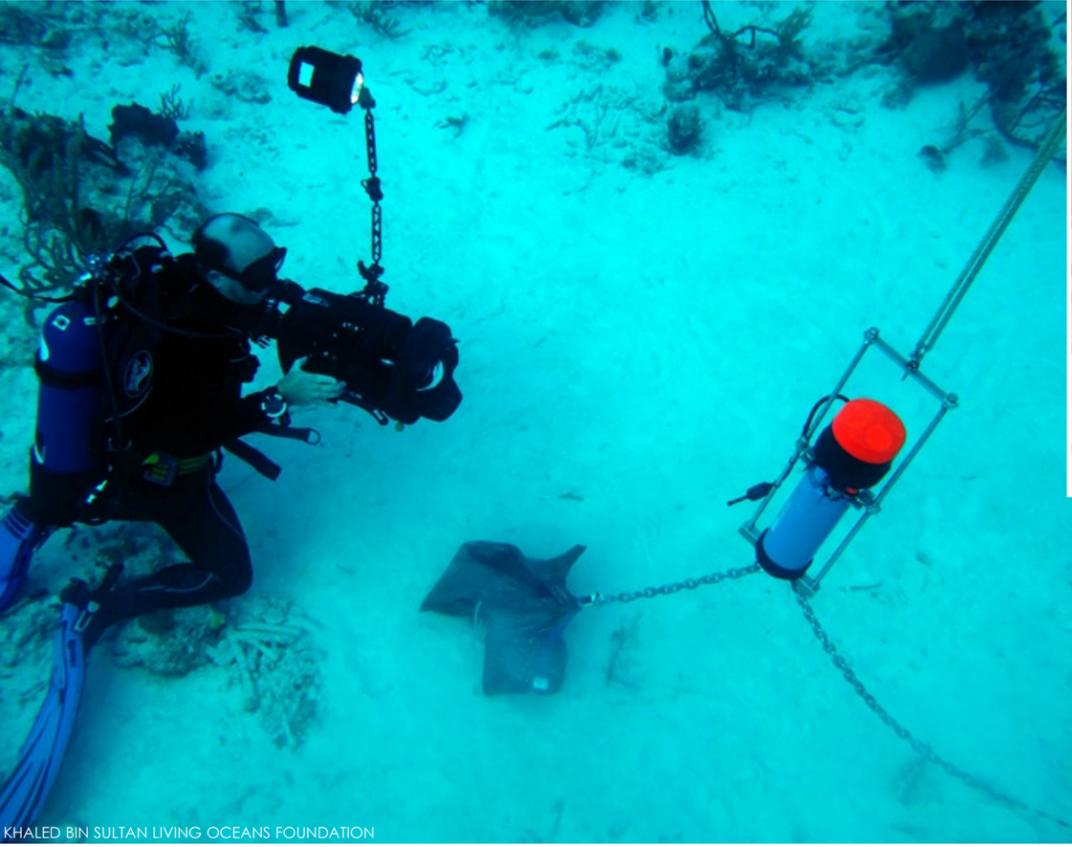
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so I went upstairs to the toilet. I went into this toilet that was just off the café, and it was so nice and warm, I fell asleep on the loo. I woke up a little bit later to a Norwegian airport announcement—I thought it had to be the last call for this flight. So, I went to go out, but the main door back into the café was locked, and I couldn't get out. Then, there was another announcement, and I was beginning to get concerned because this was a big, heavy, metal door, and I wasn't able to open it. There hadn't been many people in the café when I went in. I thought people had left the café and that it was all locked. So, I started banging on the door, kicking at it, shouting at the top of my voice. No way I was going to miss my flight! Then suddenly, there was a

noise behind me—another door opened, and all these people were looking in from the café. I had come out of the toilet cubicle and turned the wrong way. Now I was basically trying to kick myself into the cleaning closet. I had to push my way past these people and run down the stairs and get on the plane. And the thing is I had to go back through that airport several times over the next year, and there were always people there who had been in that café. I'm sure I became known as the mad man who locked himself in the toilet in Svalbard.

*AB: You've returned to Antarctica and the Arctic many times since you first went there. What kind of changes have you seen in terms of climate change?*

DA: I first went to the Arctic in 1988 and caught the tail end of what I would call the classic predictable weather period. When you went in April or May, you could pretty much guarantee nine or ten lovely days of sunshine followed by a two- or three-day blow, and then another decent period of weather. Now 25 years later, the weather in April or May can be all over the place. You don't really know what you're going to get. There can be rain, which was almost unheard of back then. You seem to see much less of the sun. The weather patterns are much less



but the peninsula of the Antarctic has warmed up so much that these Gentoos are now able to come further south. You talk to the Inuit in the Arctic because they are the people who really know. Their experience of the climate goes back not 25 years like mine but 2,000 years. They will tell you about the berries coming out sooner, about the ice changing

mer where all the ice melts in the Arctic. What this will mean in the long term to population numbers of seals, whales and polar bears is open to question. It will mean a huge change to basic Arctic marine ecology, but it seems clear that polar bear numbers will fall, and their distribution will become more restricted.

*AB: You've recently been working on some scientific films that highlight climate change. What are these projects?*

predictable weather patterns. I certainly notice that. And in the Antarctic, I can go back to places where 35 years ago I would be standing right at the front of a glacier, where I could reach out and touch the ice. I stand in that

same place now, and the glacier is 30 meters away. I can look at where 30 years ago I could see a 20,000 strong colony of Adelie penguins. I stand there now, and there are only 2,000 to 3,000 Adelies, and the rest are Gentoos penguins—so one species has moved over. Gentoos are basically a northern species,

and how much longer the summers are becoming. Things like that. There is absolutely no doubt that the Arctic is changing really, really dramatically. The amount of sea ice in the summer is much, much less than it used to be, and almost certainly in the next five to ten years, we will have a sum-

DA: I've always worked on a range of films. And certainly among the most challenging and exciting, but also good fun and worthwhile films, are the ones I've done which are conservation or issue led. That's why it has been so satisfying working with a group called the Living Oceans

Allan filming current meter deployment



*Diving Guillemots*, Allan's prize-winning photograph; Book cover of *Freeze Frame* by Doug Allan (below inset)

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enough, which is clever enough with good producers, and good story lines, where we can mix the message with the lovely wildlife and make something that really does make people think differently about the sea and about the environment, and so let people reconnect with it. The big glossy series are wonderfully polished, but I'm not sure the viewers connect with them on a visceral level the way you do with other films. I think the smaller films like the Living Oceans Foundation production are getting closer to what we want somehow.

*AB: What's your next project?*

DA: My next project is a Living Oceans Foundation program out in the Pacific. And then I have some polar bear filming to do. It's actually second unit stuff for a feature film. It's a feature film with a climate change message in it. Nothing

*AB: You've been a lot of places, and you've seen a lot of things other people haven't seen. Do you have a philosophy for making life worthwhile and enjoyable?*

DA: There are two quotations that I found a long time ago. I found them when I was at university, and I've sort of lived by them, consciously or subconsciously. One has been ascribed to Henry David Thoreau: "The mass of men live lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with song still in them."

I think you should start singing as soon as you can, and make sure you sing as long as you can, and as loud as you can.

And the other is often attributed to Mark Twain: "Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than the things you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the Trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover."

I say that somewhere inside you is a passion for something which is as strong as my passion was for diving. I didn't know when I started where I would end up, the main thing I did was follow my heart. ■

*Doug Allan's book, Freeze Frame, is available at [Dougallan.com](http://Dougallan.com). You can see the work of the Khaled bin Sultan Living Oceans Foundation at [Livingoceansfoundation.org](http://Livingoceansfoundation.org).*

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absolutely major—just a number of things to consolidate. It's always like that as a freelancer.

until we let them see what it is that we want them to protect. But I think the big series run the risk of losing that purpose. They educate to a degree, but they're not multifaceted enough. They may be realistic about the behaviors they show, but do they really show what the broader world is like?

What I would like to see is a series, which is imaginative

*AB: Why is it important to you to be involved in films that teach about ocean conservation?*

DA: Part of it is just your maturity as a person and maturity as a film maker. I know that it's my involvement with these high-end series which gave me the profile I have. But I like to think I have something now to give back.

I think when I started, I was really excited to show people things which they hadn't seen before. Twenty years ago, there was a strong case for saying that we won't get people to care about the oceans or the environment

them to come along and make space for them on their expedition—because nothing speaks to a country like local people from that country.

It's much more powerful if you have the locals talking about it; it's much more powerful if the local scientists spread the word. So, for all of these reasons, and even though they may be non-broadcast and are lower profile than a whole lot of these bigger series that I'm on, I still often think the films that the Living Oceans Foundation makes are more worthwhile.

Foundation. Their purpose is scientific, educational, and it has a conservation angle to it because they do reef surveys. They study coral reefs and use the science and the films to help influence government opinions about which are the best areas of a country's coral reefs to conserve.

The films are also used to get the information into schools, which is where I think you have to go for the basics. You've got to educate the youngsters about these things. I think it's great that wherever the foundation is, they try involving some local divers and local scientists, encourage

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