

Paul Nicklen, Cristina Mittermeier to speak at Fairmont Whistler

THE INTERNATIONALLY-RENOWNED PHOTOGRAPHERS AND CONSERVATIONISTS WILL MEET GUESTS ON MARCH 28, WITH NICKLEN DOING A SOLO EVENT ON MARCH 29

BY **DAVID SONG**

PAUL NICKLEN was the youngest person ever to join the International Photography Hall of Fame (IPHF) at the time of his 2019 induction. He's part of the Order of Canada, with an honorary PhD from the University of Victoria (UVic), an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from Simon Fraser University and a 20-year career with *National Geographic* on his resume—among other things.

If Nicklen could exchange all of those achievements for one unforgettable image that helps protect Earth's biosphere, he would do so in a heartbeat.

"I have to say to myself: 'what feels good?' Is it getting an accolade? Is it getting inducted into the Hall of Fame? Sure, those are nice little moments of recognition, but as Canadians we don't get off too much on our own achievements," he remarks. "What feels really good to me is when we can use our cameras to tell a story: to chase big oil out of certain very fragile, beautiful parts of Norway, or when we've kept the gold mining industry out of carving up new frontiers in the Yukon Territory.

"When the Supreme Court judge holds up the *National Geographic* article and says: 'this is what we're fighting for,' that's what makes me feel better than anything else. I also love it when people want to have one of my images and hang it on their wall. They are basically being reminded every day about how beautiful this planet is."

SVALBARD SURPRISE "Face to Face," taken 2008 in Svalbard, Norway.

PHOTO BY PAUL NICKLEN

Despite being born in Tisdale, Sask., Nicklen grew up on Baffin Island with his parents. They were one of three non-Inuit families in a remote community of less than 200 residents. There was no TV, no radio and no telephone to distract young Nicklen from the poetry of his majestic surroundings.

Nicklen saw his first polar bear at age five, learned the Inuktitut language and embraced stories of the Arctic land. He went on to study marine biology at UVic, becoming a scientist, photographer and scuba diver.

Over time, he grew displeased with his first career path.

"As biologists, we were just managing populations for the maximum sustainable yield—basically, how many animals can you kill without driving the population down?" Nicklen asserts. "I also realized that we, quite often as scientists, got it wrong. We protected the rights of humans and hunters, and we didn't protect the rights of the animals—animals that had no voice. That's when I got frustrated and said: 'I need to do more.'"

'A VOICE TO THE VOICELESS'

In 1994, Nicklen's former boss gave him something of an ultimatum: stating he would need to eventually choose between research and shooting photos. Nicklen responded by packing 600 pounds of gear into a Cessna 206 aircraft and getting dropped off in the general vicinity of Paulatuk, a hamlet in the Northwest Territories.

A region east of the Anderson River Delta, along the Horton River, became the backdrop for his adventurous sabbatical. Nicklen put the survival skills he learned as a youngster to use, walking more than 1,000 kilometres and paddling another 500 while encountering rugged creatures like wolverines, moose and golden eagles. He didn't see another human being for three months.

"I need to give a voice to the voiceless," Nicklen says. "I knew for the rest of my life that I was going to give a voice and a face to the animals I care about, and their ecosystems."

National Geographic provided a viable platform for this goal, and the same is true for SeaLegacy: a nonprofit organization Nicklen co-launched in 2014 with partner Cristina Mittermeier to advocate for oceans and marine life. The former Arctic resident has become enraptured with fine art photography, which lets him approach every shot with a creative mindset.

In his words: Nicklen chooses to live at the intersection of art, science and conservation.

"I want my images to be so powerful that when you're just casually scrolling through Nat Geo or casually looking through any other magazine, you see an image that grabs you by the heart, punches you in the stomach and just locks you in," he elaborates. "Those are the ones which invite you into the conversation. From there, you have to base things on science.

"Everyone just says what they want nowadays, [but] true journalism and true storytelling is based on scientific facts. And then for me: if we're telling stories without the benefits of conservation, then we're just fiddling while Rome burns. I [need] those three things to come together to feed my soul."

'WE WANT TO CONNECT'

Mittermeier lives and breathes environmental advocacy, just as Nicklen does.

The Mexico City native coined the phrase "conservation photography." She founded the International League of Conservation Photographers (ILCP) in 2005 as a vehicle for photographers highlighting ecological topics. In her eyes, conservationists fight on their own kind of front line as they try to make a difference.

"We both do the work we do because we want a microphone, we want to stand on stages and we want to connect with audiences," says Nicklen. "We want to inspire and tap into people's emotional beings. We speak outside of our echo chamber, trying to tap into the conscience of anybody who's willing to listen and open themselves up to change."

British Columbia is one of the most beautiful places Nicklen feels he's ever visited. He has authored multiple National Geographic stories about the province's environment, from sea walls to salmon to spirit bears. At one point he visited Whistler on assignment for the *New York Times Magazine*, where he documented late local icon Jeanie and other black bears.

Above all, Nicklen wants people to know that each time they buy his photos, they invest in Earth-focused storytelling.

"In a way, you're supporting an artist who's out there fighting every day for our planet," he says. "What we do is very dangerous: diving with rebreathers, high-speed ocean currents and coming back with visuals that otherwise [people will] never get to see. I do a lot of shows around the world, and this is perhaps the one I'm most excited [about]. I'm very excited about Mountain Galleries. To be able to work with such an elegant, classy group of people who have the right client base... everything just feels right."

Nicklen and Mittermeier will do a meet-and-greet on March 28 at Mountain Galleries in Fairmont Whistler. The following day, Nicklen plans to return for a solo presentation. Visit mountaingalleries.com/show/mountain-galleries-paul-nicklen-cristina-mittermeier-in-whistler to learn more. ■