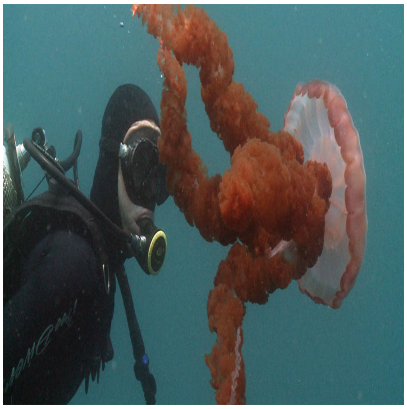

Going wet and wild with a camera

Description

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Location: Cape Point, South Africa

Renowned underwater photographer Charles Maxwell has been involved in diving adventures for over 40 years and is well acquainted with the South African marine environment. He has worked for major television broadcasters worldwide, including National Geographic and the BBC. Charles highlights the inception of his career, and some of his most memorable South African adventures filming apex predators.

In the Beginning

In 1987 I had the privilege of leading a team of divers to explore Dragonâ??s Breath in Namibia, the largest subterranean lake in the world. It was in this mysteriously magical place that I found â??a world within a worldâ?•, bringing back childhood memories of reading Jules Verneâ??s Journey to the Centre on the Earth.

Here I worked with Gerald Favre, a Swiss filmmaker, who was producing a documentary on the cave. After assisting him with underwater filming and lighting in the challenging cave environment, I was hooked and on my return to Cape Town, I purchased a video camera and housing. However, my first filming job for television was most unflattering: filming raw sewage being discharged into the sea off Green Point for local current affairs programme â??Carte Blancheâ?•. Things could only get better; and they didâ?¦.

Only a few years ago, all that was required of a cameraman was to set up a camera, pop in a tape, and get a reasonable frame. Now cameramen are akin to computer operators; itâ??s all about frame rates, compression codecs, bit rates, and chroma subsampling, then just as you think you have it all worked out, technology changes. Recently, I sent what I considered to be my technically up-to-date gear list to a production company only to be told that they were shooting in 3D.

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The goalposts are continually shifting, as are the costs. Nevertheless, my passion is diving, sharks, seals, dolphins, and whales and Iâ??ve had the opportunity to grab incredible moments with these animals. With its spectacular national heritage, South Africa provides a host of wildlife opportunities, and the filming of these magnificent animals.

From one apex predatorâ?¦

The white shark is a true apex predator with attitude. What struck me most on my first encounter with a white shark was its slow and effortless swimming style â?? this magnificent beast moved through the water with no perceivable movement of its large and powerful tail. Later, was to witness another side to the white sharkâ??s character: a ferociously wild show of absolute power as it launched itself clear of the water, clutching a seal in its powerful jaws. White sharks are often deceptively cautious, lulling one into a false sense of security. They will circle you for a long time, keeping a good distance and then suddenly, with no obvious reason, turn hard and speed in with a purpose. A good example of this was when I was filming Nicolas Hulot, legendary French television presenter, and marine biologist Laurent Ballesta, swimming with white sharks near Dyer Island.

We had spent many hours underwater but the white sharks, while ever present, had never come sufficiently close for that critical shot. As we were about to leave the water, a large white shark suddenly turned sharply and sped towards us. Fortunately my HD camera was on standby with iris and focus set, so my first reaction was to hit record. As I swung the large Sony 900 camera housing to frame the shot, I realised that the other two were unaware of their predicament.

It was one of those moments where one experiences a â??time warpâ?•. In that split second that seemed like minutes â?? while I was deciding whether I should hold the shot or warn the other divers, Laurent spotted the shark and grabbed Nicolasâ?? arm. Less than a metre from them, possibly sensing that the divers were now aware of his presence, the shark veered off and literally swam into the setting sun. We had the shot.

â?¦ To the next

Cape Point is situated at the southernmost point of the Table Mountain National Park. This impressive sandstone headland, sculpted by the sea over millions of years, represents the theoretical boundary between the cold Atlantic and temperate Indian Oceans. Sir Francis Drake, the first Englishman to round the Cape of Good Hope (Cape Point) in 1580, described this unforgettable sight:

â??This Cape is a most stately thing, and the fairest Cape we saw in the whole circumference of the earthâ?•.

While the inshore water is typically cold and greenish, with a temperature of around 12Â°C (53.6Â°F), the water only 40 kilometres (25 miles) offshore is often 22Â°C (71.6Â°F) and blue, due to the Agulhas Current that sweeps southwards from the tropics. At the interface between cold and warm water, there is much marine life to be found. While famous for tuna and other gamefish, this area is also ideal for filming mako and blue sharks, seals, dolphins, orcas, pilot whales, and sea birds. The variety of sea birds off Cape Point is astounding and includes penguins, gulls, cormorants, gannets, sheerwaters, various albatross, and petrels. Little wonder that it is a bird loverâ??s paradise!

I often work near the â??Cape Canyonâ?•, an area where the water depth quickly drops to 500 metres (1640 feet). Once the bait and chum slick is set, the sharks arrive quickly. I love being in this deep, blue water, surrounded by mako and blue sharks, tuna, and the odd seal. The yellowfin tuna are the largest and most colourful â?? some with sickles so long that they almost circle back to touch their backs.

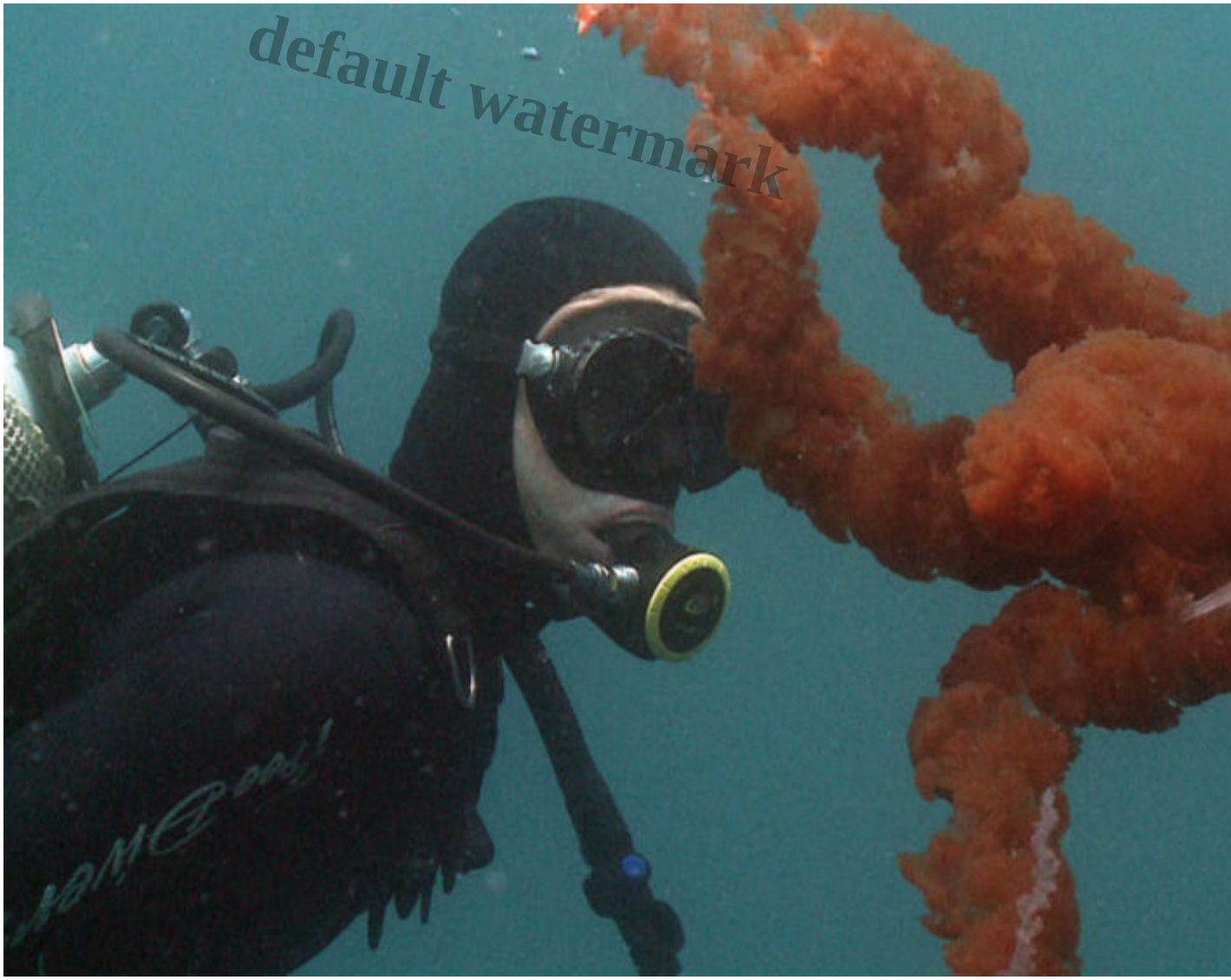
Blue sharks are more common than makos, losing count after seeing fifty. On such occasions they can be sighted everywhere â?? randomly dispersed, streamlined and agile. Seen in the water, the stunning blue of the back merges with the silver of the belly. They are active and, like all pelagic sharks, seemingly fearless, often bumping into cameras or cameramen. When a mako shark appears though, the pace goes up a few notches. These are the cheaters of the sea â?? the fastest shark in the ocean, propelled by a large tail and caudal keel. Always appearing energetic, they swim up from the deep

directly towards you at full speed.

â?¦Grand Finale

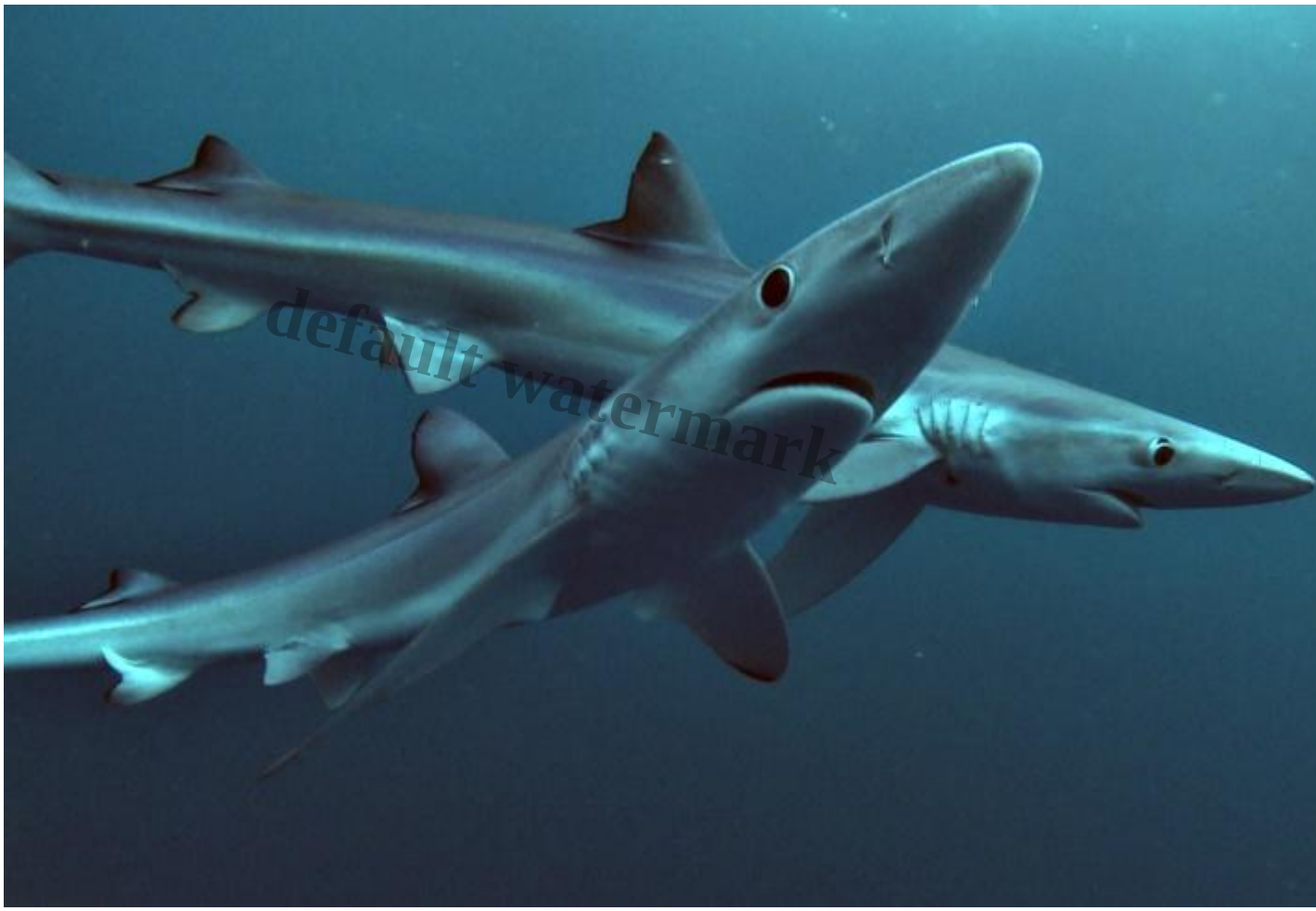
While on a shoot for German Television in Kwa Zulu-Natal, a single tiger shark worked actively at our bait drum with the occasional glimpse of others. I was discussing how opportunistic it would be to have a dead turtle as bait when an amazing call came through. A large turtle carcass had been found on the beach close to where we were working, so before long we had a â??past its sell-by dateâ?• turtle on our boat.

When we finally got it in the water, a sole tiger shark swam up to the carcass a few times, giving it a tentative bump. Finally it took a bite at a flipper and swam off with the carcass. I battled to keep up with the action but got some good close-up sequences. Despite the fact that the carcass was quite old, an impressive volume of blood seeped out of it exciting the tiger shark. The shark then started shaking the turtle, creating the illusion that it was still alive!



The current was strong and, by now, the action was fast. As a result I was unable to position myself correctly and was now up-current of the action, working in the chum slick. I was so engrossed with the

filming I was only vaguely aware that additional tiger sharks had arrived. The introduction of turtle blood into the water had had a rapid and impressive effect on the sharksâ?? behaviour. The first thing that I noticed was that the tiger sharks were turning fast and seemingly with purpose, back onto us when we pushed them away. This reaction was very different to their normally relaxed behaviour. I felt myself being pushed forward as a large tiger shark grabbed my diving cylinder in its mouth. At the same time, another shark was taking great interest in my camera. Not wanting to scratch my expensive glass dome port, I turned the camera around to hit the shark side-on.



When reviewing the footage later, it was revealed that Mark Addison, my safety diver, was kicking and hitting a third shark that was going for both of us.

It was impossible to work safely in these condi tions so, wisely, we made for the boat. I man aged to capture a final clip of the sequence by hanging over the side of the boat as a tiger shark swam away with the badly mauled carcass in a cloud of blood.

The amazing thing about this encounter was that in the space of a few minutes, one relaxed tiger shark became nine very excited tiger sharks.

Evidently, sardines in a bait drum are rather boring compared to a ripe turtle, as during all of the previous days on the shoot, no more than a few tiger sharks were attracted to the bait. How quickly things change when the right stimulus is used.

South Africaâ??s natural heritage

Nothing gets as good as False Bay; I never tire of the cold and murky waters there. It may be the fact that I learnt to dive there many years ago or the amazing reef biodiversity. Maybe it is the fact that I can see anything there, including white sharks, dolphins, seals, orcas, whales and even intense baitballs.

The kelp forests that dominate the western shore of the Bay support their own unique and complex ecosystems. Large sevengill sharks prehistoric in appearance â?? are found, in addition to small catsharks. These roll into a ball when disturbed and put their tails over their eyes, earning them the local name of â??skaamhaaiâ?? or â??shysharkâ?•.

The reefs of False Bay may not host the colourful fish of the tropics, but the vivid colours of the sea fans, sponges, sea urchins, sea anemones, and nudibranchs more than compensate for this.

Simply dropping a hydrophone into the water, I can listen to the crackle of the reef. This is often punctuated by the mournful songs of distant whales, the squeaks of dolphins and the characteristic grunts of cape fur seals. The reefs of False Bay can be a noisy place.

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Recently I was privileged to be close to a pod of six orcas, including a baby, in False Bay. The podâ??s alpha male swam protectively about 50 metres (164 feet) behind the rest, his massive dorsal fin standing high above the others. I was in my favou rite bay, Cape Point in the background with one of the most impressive predators in the ocean. Things donâ??t get better than that!

The Full Cycle: What are we Doing to Planet Earth?

Recently, as a reflection of my earlier days, I filmed another sewage pipeline off Hout Bay for an envi ronmental programme. While the unpalatable sight of spewing sewage was not dissimilar to that off Green Point nearly 25 years ago, the equipment that I was using, downloading files at a rate of over 20 MB/second, could not have been contem plated, even by someone with the most fertile imagination, back in 1987.

As technology has expanded exponentially, and the opportunities to film and experience marine life have increased, it is somewhat disillusioning to consider the current pillage of the oceans. From ocean acidification, whaling, overfishing, and the almost obliteration of our oceansâ?? apex predators, the privileges to experience more may dwindle. The diversity of South Africa lends itself to brilliant filming opportunities, but education with a pur pose to conserve is much needed if the prospects of capturing wildlife on camera, and delivering those images to others, are to endure.

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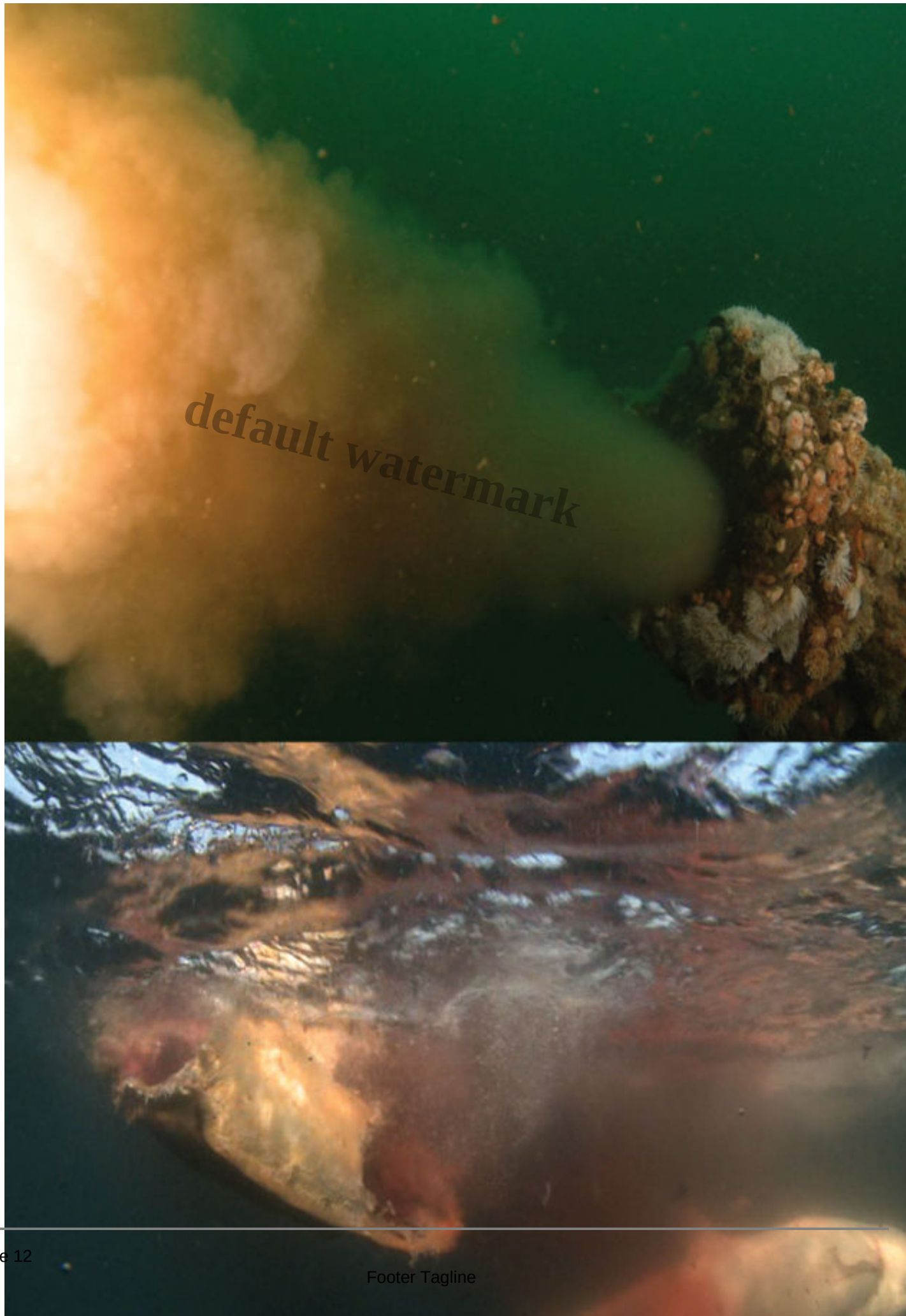
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