

CALL OF THE WILD

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2011-12 EDITION

\$5

THE LAST OCEAN: WELLER'S ANTARCTICA



Interview by Irene M.K. Rawlings, *Guest Editor*

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John Weller, a nature photographer and writer, started working on *The Last Ocean Project* with marine biologist David Ainley in 2004. The Ross Sea is recognized as the most pristine open-ocean ecosystem left on earth. In essence, the Ross Sea is the last ocean and offers us the unique last chance to see this incredible wildlife. We caught up with Weller just as he was leaving for another trip "down under."

CALL OF THE WILD: You were photographer of wild lands long before you went to document the Ross Sea, what was it about that body of water—the Ross Sea—that fetched you?

JOHN WELLER: This story starts much earlier and in a much different place. It starts at the Great Sand Dunes National Park where I spent one week out of every month for three and a half years—wandering the desert and photographing. I went into the very-back

country...terrain so remote that I never saw another person. I actually discovered a mite that nobody had seen before. Then a developer moved in and wanted to pump water out of an aquifer that underlies the dunes. We showed that the developer's plan would adversely affect the dunes... but the real reason the dunes were saved is that the developer's plan would adversely affect people. That, to me, redefined the colloquial definition of conservation. I realized that protecting this place was for the good of the people. And this is a story we have to tell again and again. Conservation is a necessity not a luxury.

COTW: You published a critically acclaimed book of photography and essays about the Great Sand Dunes National Park (*Great Sand Dunes National Park: Between Light and Shadow*) and your photography was shown at the National Museum of Wildlife Art. When that project was finished, how did you find the Ross Sea? Or did it find you?

JW: You could say that it found me. A friend handed me a paper by marine biologist Dr. David Ainley. The paper clearly demonstrated that the Ross Sea is the last intact large marine eco-system left on earth and that the oceans are in a dire, dire state. In short, we have damaged every eco-system in every ocean except for this one. The Ross Sea is the last place to study the natural process. As an educated person who was involved in environmental stuff, I was stunned that this degradation of the oceans was completely invisible to me. After I read David Ainley's paper, I could not sleep. A few days later, I called the scientist and said,

All images by John Weller. Ross Sea, Antarctica, © 2011 John Weller.

LEFT TOP: Emperor Penguins—detail, (Canon EOS 1Ds Mark II).

LEFT: *Adélie on Pack Ice* (Canon EOS 1Ds Mark II, 70-200mm lens).

The Ross Sea ecosystem is unique—composed of species found nowhere else. Until recently, human beings were not part of this system. But that situation is changing. We have started fishing in the Ross Sea, and the ecosystem's delicate balance may now be at risk.

ABOVE: *Hunting Adélies* (Canon EOS 1Ds Mark II, 16-35mm lens).

Heat rises in visible waves from the towering hummocks of crumbling black pumice and rubble, strewn down the slope from the rim of the caldera to the edge of the sea 12,000 feet below. A windswept cloud clings to the top of the volcano, an exaggerated plume of smoke in an otherwise bright blue sky. The ground is barren. The entire sea, the volcano, actually everything but the one outcrop of volcanic rocks—is covered in white ice. But above the wind, near the meeting of rock and sea, a colony of black and white birds sounds a cacophony, squabbling over the business of making nests and hunting krill in the nearby sea-ice crack.

John Weller. Ross Sea, Antarctica, ©2011 John Weller.
Pack Ice in the Ross Sea—detail, (Canon EOS 1Ds Mark II, 24mm lens).
A jigsaw puzzle of floating ice extends as far as you can see in the Ross
Sea, Antarctica. It is one of the harshest places on earth, but also one
of the most pristine. It is filled with life...



"THERE IS A THIN WHITE BAND, SPLITTING SEA AND SKY AND STRETCHING ACROSS THE SOUTHERN HORIZON.

"I want to come meet you...maybe we can collaborate to bring this story out in the open."

COTW: Describe the urgency you so clearly felt that this story had to be told quickly.

JW: There is a huge urgency. The Ross Sea is the only sea that still has its natural array of predators and a very dynamic ecosystem but it is being threatened by commercial fishing. Overwhelming evidence suggests that over-fishing has profoundly damaged most, if not all of the rest of the world's marine ecosystems. Estimates are that we've eaten 90% of the world's top predatory fish, 95% of the world's sharks and 90% of the great whales. I wanted to go down to the Ross Sea in a directed way and to tell the story that needs to be told, trying to affect social change.

COTW: Where is the Ross Sea and how did you journey there?

JW: The Ross Sea, a deep and pristine bay of the Southern Ocean in Antarctica, was discovered by British explorer James Clark Ross in

1840s. My first trip was in a 300-foot Russian icebreaker in November (summertime in the Southern hemisphere). The currents, especially through Drake's Passage, run both clockwise and counterclockwise. You can imagine the upheaval as the whole ocean gets funneled through that little gap. Thirty-foot swells (during which you can walk on the walls of the ship) are not uncommon. Sixty-foot swells can happen. Then, almost out of the blue, I saw huge birds—albatrosses. The really big ones have 13-foot wingspans and look like dinosaurs. There are 22 species of albatross, 19 of which are critically endangered by long-line fisheries. Some species lay a single egg every two years.

COTW: Describe what you saw and your reaction upon arriving at the Ross Sea.

JW: There is a thin white band, splitting sea and sky and stretching across the southern horizon. I watch this white line coming closer and, suddenly, we're in the ice. At the very edge of the ice—just where it meets the Southern Sea—there are little pieces, then they get bigger to the size of a table, a house, a city block, a city. The ship follows "rivers," seams in between the jigsaw-puzzle pieces of ice. As we get deeper and



I WATCH THIS WHITE LINE COMING CLOSER AND, SUDDENLY, WE'RE IN THE ICE."

deeper into the ice, the ocean becomes still. When we hit one of the lakes inside the ice, the water is flat calm. An aerial view of this area looks like we're traveling through the lakes and rivers of Minnesota or the lake country in southern Canada. Then I see a minke whale, diving out of the way of the ship. The lakes are full of krill and the whales have no competition for feeding.

Antarctica is a place of extremes. It is the coldest, windiest, and driest place on earth. And I'm thinking that if I didn't have this ship, this big puffy coat, down pants, and boots, I could not survive. But there are so many magnificent creatures breathing in the 30-below air and thriving at the very edge of possibility.

COTW: What are your most vivid memories?

JW: To get some of my underwater shots, I'd drill through 10-foot-thick ice. Once under the ice, the visibility is 2,000 feet or more and it feels a little like you're skydiving. Sometimes I stay under water for an hour or more to get the shot I want but it is so beautiful that I don't feel the cold. Seals drop down through cracks in the ice and appear like

apparitions. The adult seals know I'm there and they are not curious... or scared. The pups are very curious. I saw a mother seal teaching her pup how to swim. First I heard her mewling to her pup. The pup was freaked out. The mother mewed to it again and again. Half an hour later, she and the pup were swimming. Over the course of the next three weeks, I saw them maybe half a dozen times. Often the pup would come over, check me out, and look me right in the face.

COTW: Why is the Ross Sea important to all of us?

JW: To create the awareness and change that's needed to protect this pristine place, we all must weigh in. The story of the Ross Sea is not just about the science, it is also about interconnected communities. It is the story of our struggle to become a sustainable planet. And, if enough of us care enough to make our voices heard, we may be able to write a hopeful next chapter.

The Last Ocean: Antarctica's Ross Sea Photographs by John Weller will be on exhibition October 1, 2011 – January 29, 2012.