

Fabien Cousteau plans 31-day underwater mission

June 1 2014, by Jennifer Kay



This 2012 photo provided by Mission 31, Fabien Cousteau sits inside Aquarius Reef Base in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Beginning Sunday, June 1, 2014, the filmmaker and Jacques Cousteau's grandson plans to spend 31 days living underwater at the lab, making a documentary and leading a five-person crew on science experiments. (AP Photo/Courtesy of Mission 31)

Like viewers worldwide, Fabien Cousteau was entranced by his famous grandfather's films about marine life and human exploration underwater. Now he's adding to his family's sea stories with a 31-day underwater

expedition in the Florida Keys.

Cousteau dove Sunday to Aquarius Reef Base, a school bus-sized laboratory 60 feet (18 meters) below the ocean's surface, a few miles off Key Largo. He plans to spend more than a month living underwater with a five-person crew, making a documentary and leading science experiments on the nearby coral reef.

Before their boat left an Islamorada dock Sunday morning, Cousteau and his crew said they would miss seeing the sun for more than month, but they weren't nervous about being isolated in the undersea lab.

"I imagine we'll want to stay down once we get comfy down there," Cousteau said. "We won't want to come back up to the surface because it's such a magical place."

The idea for "Mission 31" came to Cousteau two years ago when he visited Aquarius during a fundraising push to save the lab, which federal budget cuts had threatened to permanently close.

"It reminded me that I've always wanted to live underwater," Cousteau said Saturday at his training base in Islamorada.

"Mission 31" builds on the legacy of Conshelf II, the 30-day underwater living experiment in the Red Sea that Jacques Cousteau filmed in 1963 for his Oscar-winning documentary "World Without Sun."



This 2012 photo provided by Mission 31, Fabien Cousteau sits in the entrance to Aquarius Reef Base in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Beginning Sunday, June 1, 2014, the filmmaker and Jacques Cousteau's grandson plans to spend 31 days living underwater at the lab, making a documentary and leading a five-person crew on science experiments. (AP Photo/Courtesy of Mission 31)

The younger Cousteau can do something his grandfather could not: broadcast the entire adventure live online and communicate with the public through social media and video chats with classrooms on land.

"For the first time I'm able to invite the world on a Cousteau expedition in real time," said Cousteau, who has filmed documentaries on sharks and other [marine life](#).

Jacques Cousteau was revered worldwide for exploring the ocean in a

multitude of documentaries and books, as well as for pioneering the advanced scuba diving techniques used at Aquarius. While he developed underwater living experiments out of the belief that an overpopulated world might drive humans to live in the oceans, interest in the habitats waned through the decades until Aquarius was the last underwater research lab.

His grandson believes interest in the oceans is reviving as climate change threatens to disrupt life on land.



Fabien Cousteau walks, on Sunday, June 1, 2014, on the boat ferrying him from Florida International University's Medina Aquarius Program headquarters in Islamorada, Fla., to the waters above Aquarius Reef Base in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Cousteau plans to spend 31 days underwater at Aquarius, leading a team of researchers and making a documentary. (AP Photo/Jennifer Kay)

"Whether you care about economics, in your personal life or your business life, whether you care about your health or your child's health, whether you care about saving creatures, it all pertains to making sure that our oceans are healthy. And our oceans are not," Cousteau said.

Throughout the expedition, Florida International University and Northeastern University researchers will study the effects of climate change and pollution on the coral reef. The crew will experiment with new technology that uses sonar to create three-dimensional video images, allowing them to gather data and footage without lights that would disrupt the fish.



Fabien Cousteau stands in front of one of the wetsuits, on Sunday, June 1, 2014, in Islamorada, Fla., that his team will wear while scuba diving at Aquarius Reef

Base in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Cousteau plans to spend 31 days underwater at Aquarius, leading a team of researchers and making a documentary. (AP Photo/Jennifer Kay)

Diving with a Cousteau helps bring more attention to the scientific work being performed at Aquarius, said Andy Shantz, an FIU researcher who will spend half the month living and working at the base.

"These are really important issues and to be able to bring that out and get a bit of a spotlight on the research and the science behind it is awesome," Shantz said.

The 400-square-foot (37-square-meter) pressurized Aquarius lab has six bunk beds and allows scientists to live and work underwater and scuba dive for extended periods of time, without needing to return to the surface or decompress. It's owned by the U.S. government and operated by FIU.



Fabien Cousteau waves, on Sunday, June 1, 2014, from the boat ferrying him from Florida International University's Medina Aquarius Program headquarters in Islamorada, Fla., to the waters above Aquarius Reef Base in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. Cousteau plans to spend 31 days underwater at Aquarius, leading a team of researchers and making a documentary. (AP Photo/Jennifer Kay)

Astronauts train at Aquarius to simulate living and working in outer space. The lab's technological edge doesn't extend to its kitchen area. "Unfortunately for me as a French person, the food also will be simulated. Freeze-dried, astronaut type of food, canned foods, things like that," Cousteau said, grimacing.

Cousteau plans to resurface July 2, at the end of the longest mission ever held at Aquarius since it began operations in 1993.

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