

TAILS

FROM THE DEEP

PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONY WU

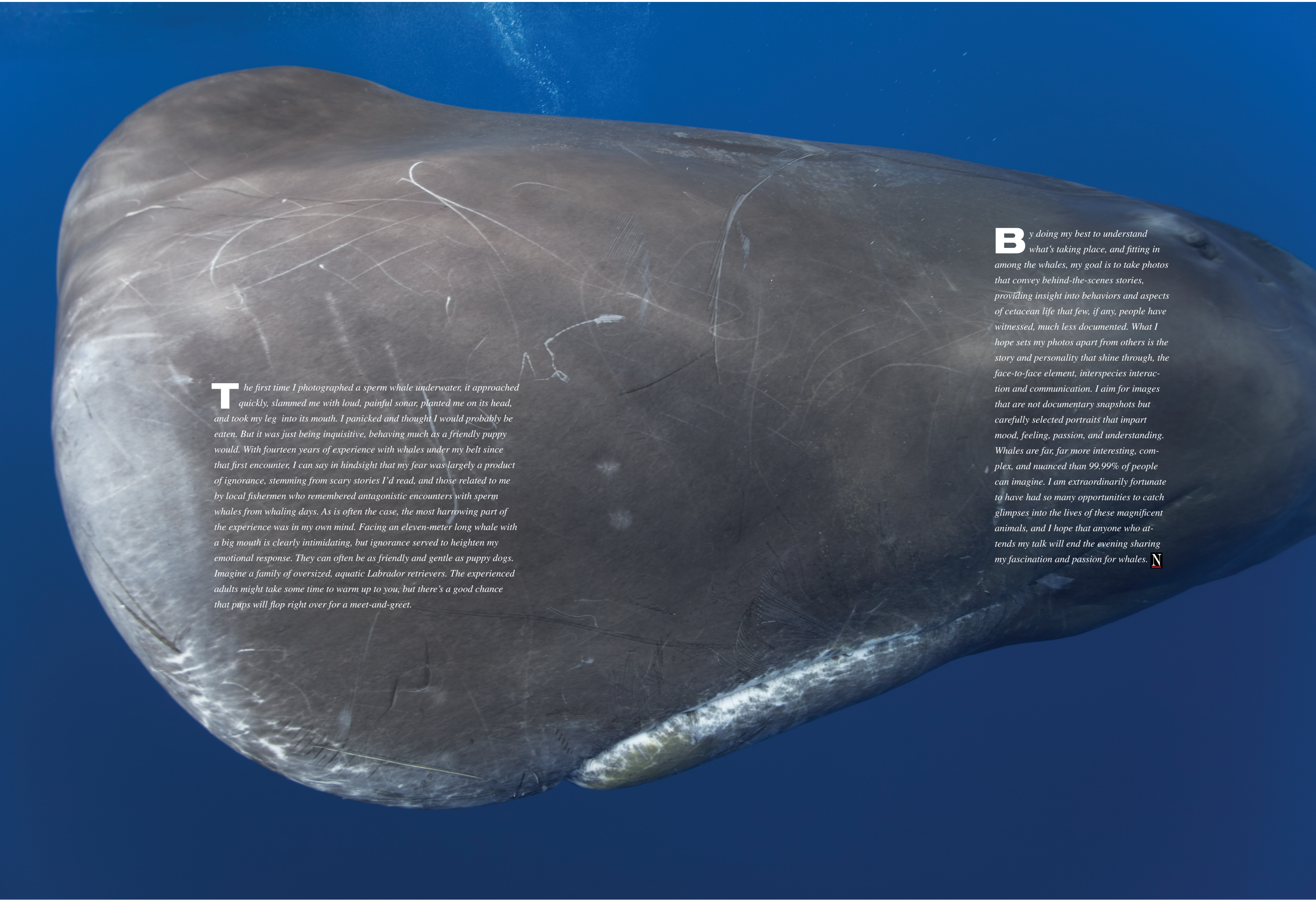
On July 8th, award-winning underwater photographer Tony Wu will present “My Life with Whales” at the Nantucket Whaling Museum. As a preview to his presentation, Wu gave *N Magazine* an exclusive look at a selection of his most stunning photographs and shared some of his stories and lessons learned from swimming with the world’s largest mammals.



Over the years, I've come to consider myself a photo-naturalist. Of course, my primary goal is to capture beautiful images, but I take photographs to convey information about my subjects. I spend all my time studying whales and other marine life, communicating with researchers, examining my own notes from the field. The purpose of my efforts is to understand the behavior, and for lack of better terms, the thinking and personalities, of my subjects. Developing an in-depth understanding of my chosen subjects, then forming a personal relationship while I'm in the water with them, gives me the opportunity to observe and sometimes participate in their lives. Photographs are almost an afterthought, coming at the tail-end of interaction.



The threat from whaling is clearly nowhere near the level it was in the past. That era is over. These days, the biggest threats to whales are collisions with large ships, which happen much more than we acknowledge; entanglements in fishing gear; and pollution. All three of these take a tremendous toll on whales and other marine life world-wide. Worse, they are indiscriminate killers. Ships, nets, and pollution don't distinguish among endangered and non-endangered species. Collectively, humanity does not have a handle on how serious these problems are. I can say from personal experience that these issues pose a very real, clear and present danger to all marine creatures, most certainly to whales.



The first time I photographed a sperm whale underwater, it approached quickly, slammed me with loud, painful sonar, planted me on its head, and took my leg into its mouth. I panicked and thought I would probably be eaten. But it was just being inquisitive, behaving much as a friendly puppy would. With fourteen years of experience with whales under my belt since that first encounter, I can say in hindsight that my fear was largely a product of ignorance, stemming from scary stories I'd read, and those related to me by local fishermen who remembered antagonistic encounters with sperm whales from whaling days. As is often the case, the most harrowing part of the experience was in my own mind. Facing an eleven-meter long whale with a big mouth is clearly intimidating, but ignorance served to heighten my emotional response. They can often be as friendly and gentle as puppy dogs. Imagine a family of oversized, aquatic Labrador retrievers. The experienced adults might take some time to warm up to you, but there's a good chance that pups will flop right over for a meet-and-greet.

By doing my best to understand what's taking place, and fitting in among the whales, my goal is to take photos that convey behind-the-scenes stories, providing insight into behaviors and aspects of cetacean life that few, if any, people have witnessed, much less documented. What I hope sets my photos apart from others is the story and personality that shine through, the face-to-face element, interspecies interaction and communication. I aim for images that are not documentary snapshots but carefully selected portraits that impart mood, feeling, passion, and understanding. Whales are far, far more interesting, complex, and nuanced than 99.99% of people can imagine. I am extraordinarily fortunate to have had so many opportunities to catch glimpses into the lives of these magnificent animals, and I hope that anyone who attends my talk will end the evening sharing my fascination and passion for whales. **N**