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She wasn't an environmental expert, but now she has a 'Green Nobel'

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When it came time to choose a logo for her nongovernmental organization Bloom, which fights to preserve marine environments, Claire Nouvian opted for the piglet squid.

The deep-sea creature is as captivating as it is cast aside. "It's just great; just watch it: It does the show for you," Ms. Nouvian says. "Yet no one knows about it; no one cares about it. No one would know if it disappeared."

And that pretty much sums up the past decade for Nouvian, as she's fought to end deep-sea trawling. What began with wonder at the creatures residing in the depths has turned into a fierce battle that has brought her death threats and financial distress.

This year the fight has garnered her a Goldman Environmental Prize – dubbed the Green Nobel – which is given annually to grass-roots environmentalists who are struggling, often against great odds, around the world for change. Nouvian has managed to rally the French public to her side as she's taken on powerful lobbies in her country and more broadly in Europe, ultimately helping to secure a European Union-wide ban on deep-sea trawling that started phasing in last year.

"When I discovered the deep sea, how incredibly fascinating and strange and unknown this environment was, I wanted to share it. But in the process of digging into it, I also learned how remote, pristine, and fragile it was and that it wasn't pristine anymore because we were trashing it with huge industrial bulldozers, deep-sea bottom trawlers, from various nations," she says. "I was shocked."

Although the deep-sea fight started as a lonely campaign, she saw it as urgent. "When there is an opportunity for exploitation and profit to be made, industry is on top of the game much faster than scientists, legislators, or public awareness," she says.

Born in Bordeaux, France, Nouvian moved around the world as a young girl, including to Algeria, where she spent weekends by the sea with her father, a recreational fisherman. As an adult she became a journalist and documentary producer, and she was drawn to the subject of how animals cope with eternal darkness while she was working on a television show about it. She published a book on it, called "The Deep," in 2006.

She didn't have an environmental background or a particular interest in animal welfare. It was more a sense of awe – which the Parisian still displays a decade later, whether she's talking about the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, the piglet squid, or the little regard that so many have for this creature's well-being.

Bottom trawling is considered one of the most destructive forms of commercial fishing. In France, the largest commercial fleet of ships, which has included six deep-sea trawlers, is owned by the supermarket Intermarché. Such ships, Bloom says, have the capacity to destroy the landmass equivalent to the city of Paris in two days – and along with it coral species that have grown for 10,000 years.

When EU institutions were preparing the reform of laws on deep-sea fishing in 2008, Nouvian saw a chance to influence policy. She started by analyzing the financial accounts of French deep-sea fleets, ultimately showing

that they were all unprofitable despite being subsidized. She then won a case in 2012 against Intermarché for claiming in advertising that its fishing practices posed no threat to the marine ecosystem.

Some 900,000 signatures

The next year Bloom launched a consumer campaign that was eventually turned into a comic strip by French cartoonist Pénélope Bagieu, which at its heart shows commercial exploitation where almost everyone loses. It called on the French government to support an EU-wide ban on deep-sea trawling – collecting 900,000 signatures.

By January 2014, Intermarché announced it would no longer trawl below 800 meters (875 yards) and that it would stop selling deep-sea fish in its supermarkets by 2025. Yet France continued to oppose the EU legislation, so Nouvian didn't give up. Once France was on board, the EU was able to get all members to agree to a ban in June 2016.

Today, trawling is prohibited in 360,000 square miles of the northeastern Atlantic. Nouvian's "innovative and data-driven approach directly led to Intermarché's adoption of sustainable fishing practices. This was the crucial first step that led to France – and ultimately the European Union itself – supporting a ban on deep-sea bottom trawling," says Michael Sutton, executive director of the Goldman Environmental Foundation, in a statement on Nouvian's selection for the prize.

Nouvian looks at the fight both philosophically and pragmatically. On the one hand, it's a disconcerting story about the power of technology that humans have created, similar to the way society is bracing for automated workforces or meddling in faraway elections.

"There is a realization that we have a technological responsibility," she says. She sees a shortening interval "between technical efficiency and the possibility to destroy everything, wipe things out in an instant.... We've created this monster that we're not too sure we can control."

But she concedes that the reason the public supports her cause is probably more pragmatic: People realized that their tax money was being used to subsidize the deep-sea fleets.

Staying the course

She's amassed plenty of enemies, and not only has she received death threats, but she's been defamed. She credits a fishery scientist, Daniel Pauly, for giving her the fortitude to stay the course. "He told me, 'Don't even read what they write. Don't pay attention. Stick to your productivity. Prove it with data.' It's the best piece of advice I've ever been given."

Yet financial strain made this work seem untenable at points, especially after she became a mother. She earned money on "The Deep" and an accompanying exhibition at the National Natural History Museum in Paris, but she funneled most of that back into Bloom, based in Paris and Hong Kong. "I can take a lot of workload, political pressure, and death threats, but the financial pressure is what made me close to giving up," she says.

Except she never did. "Claire is ... agile and creative and bulldoggish," says Matthew Gianni, a former commercial fisherman who became a conservationist. "She gets onto something and won't let it go." Mr. Gianni, who cofounded the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, and Nouvian worked together to push for the EU ban.

Despite her victories, she is not optimistic. In November, some 15,000 scientists signed a "Warning to Humanity," about everything from overpopulation to climate change to lack of clean water. It is the second of its type: One in 1992 was signed by more than 1,700 scientists. "Fifteen thousand scientists," she says, "and the next day people ask, 'What's on TV today?' No, I'm sorry. We should stop and ... completely change the way we produce, consume, and live," Nouvian says.

Her next battles include ensuring that the World Trade Organization adopts an agreement in 2019 to eliminate public subsidies that drive overfishing worldwide, and banning electric pulse fishing in Europe – a technique that uses an electric pulse to startle fish away from the seabed and into nets. In January, after a huge advocacy effort by Bloom and allies, the European Parliament voted to ban the practice in Europe, a surprise victory that has elicited a backlash from powerful lobbies, primarily Dutch, and some unlikely foes like Greenpeace Netherlands that have criticized the decision as counter to innovation. "It is going to be a long fight," Nouvian says.

• For more, visit bloomassociation.org/en.

How to take action

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- Pan African Sanctuary Alliance secures a future for Africa's primates and their habitat through a collaboration of African sanctuaries, communities, and governments, as well as global experts. Take action: Make a donation to help rescue an animal from cruelty.
- Develop Africa is committed to sustainable development in Africa through education and other means. Take action: Support a poultry project involving orphan children in Sierra Leone.
- Osa Conservation applies scientific and other expertise to protecting the biodiversity of the Osa Peninsula in Costa Rica. Take action: Finance the planting of trees to help restore a rainforest.

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