

Schooling Fish

with Martin Edge

There is no bigger thrill than photographing schools of fish. I have been to many destinations with other keen, passionate underwater photographer. Their enthusiasm jumps into overdrive when they have such an opportunity. They enjoy the chase, the challenges and the spectacle. However, there satisfaction with the images they obtained rarely lives up to ones aspirations. Why is that?

I often feel the same. Always believing I should have done better!

I have closely analysed my own techniques in this area of underwater photography. I have looked at successful images of other photographers. National Geographic and Doubilet. Chris Newbert and his images in 'Within a Rainbowed Sea' and 'Sea of Dreams' I looked at my own achievements and those of my peers and as a result I have developed strong opinions on which images tend to work and those, which do not. Let's discuss some of my own priorities but let us also not lose sight of the fact that they are just my opinions and nothing more than that.

My boss at work used to say. "Don't bring me problems, bring me solutions". In discussing the problems with shooting successful pictures of schooling fish I have some ideas, 'solutions' which some of you may helpful.



Schooling bumphead parrot fish

These have been a frequent challenge to me over the years. The Sipadan Bumpheads feast on coral wherever they travel. The visibility is substantially reduced. Their dark green bodies soak up the light and result in underexposure. They travel close to the reef, so achieving separation is difficult. Behaviour shots of them crushing the coral are quite straight forward but they are at their most supreme when cruising the drop off like a heard of buffalo. I used the wide aperture technique to allow the flash to reach the subjects in this example. A low angle of view, shooting up onto the edge of the reef has separated them against a blue water background and depicts their herding behaviour. A diagonal composition leading the eye through the frame balances their shape with other features of the reef.

Subal Housing, Nikon F801, 20mm lens, Twin flashguns on TTL, F8 @ 60th sec, Ektachrome 100iso

T-shirts and posters

Cast your mind back to a dive show, which you may have recently attended. Consider all the T-shirts on display to the general diving public or perhaps to holiday guests at a tropical dive resort. Visualise the images on these items of clothing, which relate to fish. We have

probably purchased such a t-shirt as a holiday memento at some time.

An artist has had to consider the design and composition of the group of fish. How many to include in the sketch. One, three, five or more! How to place one subject so that it balances with the others. Are the eyes visible or hidden? Do tails overlap? Are

School of Jacks in Sipadan (Right)

I often have this internal battle with myself, on this occasion the effects of showing parts of the school swimming out of the frame. Fish bodies are plainly visible but the heads are missing. I try to capture a leading fish and in a perfect world give it a little space to swim into. Often this is just not possible. Neither is it possible to leave the sunburst completely out of shot. I would have preferred to exclude it in this example but with the width of my 16mm fisheye lens, the location of the school and position of the afternoon sun, this was just not possible. Is the sun too bright? Does it detract from the main content of the picture? I will let you decide.

When shooting large schools even with a fisheye lens the camera to subject distances can be anything from 1.5 meters away and more. On these occasions I recommend the following lighting techniques. Select wider apertures than the norm. I often shoot at F5.6 and F8 when in reality F11 or F16 would suffice. The reason for this is twofold:

** F5.6 allows the flash to travel further through the water than F16 and paints the fish with fill-in flash, which creates detail and increases impact.*

** Wider apertures will in turn provide a faster shutter speed, particularly when shooting into the sun as in this example. The shutter speed will stop the action and prevent blur, which is also preferable.*



I see many schooling fish pictures, which to the frustration of the maker are unlit. This is often because their distance is too far for the flash to travel. Try this tip, It works a treat.

Subal Housing, Nikon F90x, 16mm fisheye lens, dual YS 120 flashguns on manual full power. F5.6 @ 125th sec, Ektachrome VS 100

Poster example

I had been explaining my philosophy on schooling fish to a number of photographers when I spotted this poster in a greasy spoon cafe in La Paz, Baja. The owner allowed me to take a shot. It happened to be my best shot of the trip in the Sea of



Cortez, 2001. We were hit by Hurricane Juliet, landlocked for 6 days and we never saw a thing!

Joking aside, the freedom of the artist to design the fish in

whatever formation is a huge advantage. Take note of these designs in all manner of art. . We should learn from their talent

and the choices they make when we come to consider our own way of photographing marine life.



This particular opportunity arose when I was shooting with a 105mm macro lens beneath Town Pier Bonaire. These three snappers were separated from a larger group. They were hanging about two meters off a sandy bottom in about 5 meters of water. I spent time with these as I found they would allow me to approach within arms length and they were hanging in formation. The ideal lens would have been a 60mm macro as I could have included them entirely within my composition however I backed off with my 105mm but considered that the distance and visibility would produce an inferior result. I took about 6 shots in all and cropped them quite tightly. This shot was marginally the best. I like the formation and negative space. Similar shots with all of the fish in the frame are a more pleasing composition but they lack the sharpness and clarity of this example. As I took these shots, I remember asking myself where the best place along their bodies would be for me to compositionally 'amputate' them. Near the tail? Behind the head? In-between? I'm not sure I chose the best place on this occasion but the concept of the most suitable crop is now much more uppermost in my mind whenever I shoot fish pictures which do not include all of the fish. Although they are composed on this page in a vertical format, in the sea they were actually shot in a horizontal format. A quarter turn to the right was their actual orientation.

Subal Housing, Nikon F90x, 105 macro lens, single YS 120 flash on TTL, F8 @ 90th sec, Ektachrome VS 100.

they swimming in every direction? The artist/designer is not confined to the reality of a camera. They can sketch all colours, shapes and sizes of fish but one thing that all have in common is a sense of harmony, order and balance in the visual design. Who would buy them if they were not pleasing to the eye? There is no better exercise to sharpen your photo-perception than to study the design of fish on posters and clothing.

Organised Chaos

I have used this term before on numerous occasions to describe the art of shooting schooling fish. Lets face it; for the most part fish swim in a disordered, chaotic and jumbled mass. In my experience this is the main reason why we become dissatisfied with our results. Whilst observing them over a period of time we perceive an orderly and tidy gathering. However, our camera freezes them in a fraction of a second and the thought of "chaos" springs to mind. What we have to do is to



Goat fish Salt Pier

Salt Pier is an excellent location for shooting fish. The circular pillars, which make up the legs of the pier, are encrusted with sponges. The pier sits on the very edge of a sloping reef and visibility appears endless. Small schools of snappers, grunts and goatfish hug the seabed amongst the pillars. If you shoot towards the seabed or into the reef the negative space is messy and unattractive. My advice is to shoot out to sea with the shoreline behind you. In this direction you can target the numerous small schools against a vivid blue water background. The graphic shapes of the pillars have to be considered as an essential part of your composition. It is not the school which will ruin your view but the negative space behind. In this example the school are shaped in a triangle which I noticed as I composed the shot. I took about 4 shots, one after the other as soon as my flash would re cycle. This example was cleaner and less busy than the others were.

Subal housing a Nikon F90x, Nikon 17mm - 35mm zoom. 2 x YS 120 flash guns set to TTL on bendy arms (15 sections each arm) F5.6 @ 90th sec, Ektachrome VS 100



Mabul Pier

One fabulous day beneath Mabul Water Village Pier. The sea was glass calm, visibility was good with a cloudless sky. Guy Middleton and myself opted out of the boat dive and took advantage of the conditions and a thick school of juveniles beneath the structure of the jetty. I was particularly excited by the opportunity that afternoon that I shot 4 films one after another. My maximum depth was just 2 meters! Although the school maintained a spherical formation the speed of movement of the formation was rapid. I used a fast shutter speed and available light three out of four films. My primary consideration was how to handle the composition between the school and the formation of the jetty. As the fish moved so did my camera. I choose shutter priority to keep up with the action and let the aperture take care of itself.

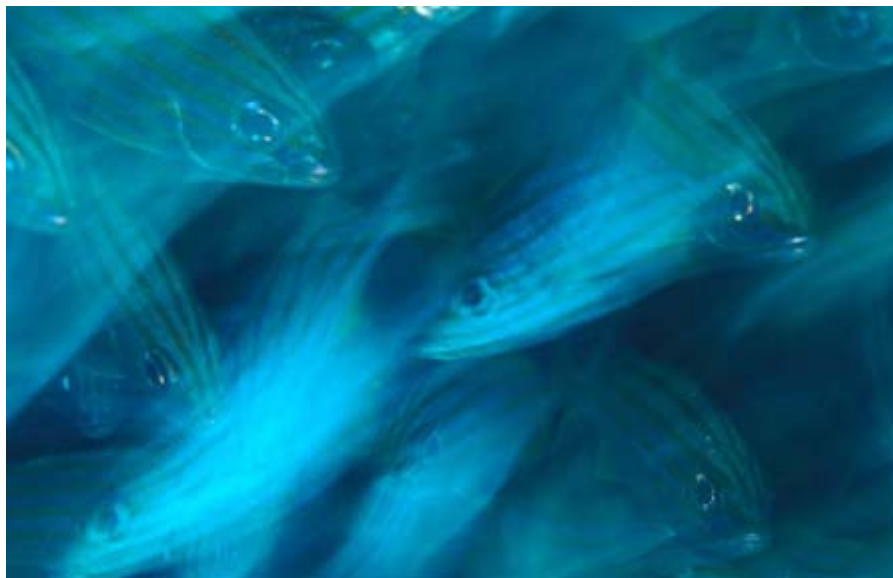
Subal F90x 16mm fisheye lens, 250th sec, aperture in the region of F8 - F22. Ektachrome VS 100

search for an element of organization within the chaos.

My first solution when photographing schooling fish is to have in mind the notion of balance, order and harmony. Just like the T-shirts. For me this way of thinking works really well.

Practice Sometimes Makes Perfect

I have tried this exercise on numerous photo courses and it really can help. Find some footage of schooling fish on a video. Concentrate on it and watch it through several times if it helps. (BBC Blue Planet series is excellent for this). Using the VCR remote control handset, watch the footage and by using the 'pause' button, freeze the action when the school has achieved a sense of balance and order. You will be amazed at the results and degree of difficulty to capture a frozen moment in time.



Grunts rear Curtain Sync

Like many of you, I have also tried 'Rear Curtain Sync' techniques and I have to admit that I do like the effects of the rhythm and action that RCS produces. However, you never know what the results will be like until you have your film developed (unless you have digital of course). I shot several rolls of film on schooling grunts in Bonaire and achieved between 6 and 10, which I was pleased with. I have recently reviewed them for this article and realise that the ones, which worked (in my opinion), have an element of compositional balance to them. This shot is no exception

Subal F90x 20mm lens, half second @ F8. Sea & Sea YS120ys flash on TTL Elite 100

Equipment

I use whichever lens and camera I feel is correct to do the job. Shooting seals in Mexico I used a Nikonos 111 and 15 mm lens. Schooling jacks in Sipadan I favour a 16mm fisheye lens in a housing. I have encountered schooling Batfish with a 60mm lens and just done the best I could in the circumstances. Some of my best images have been planned and well thought out whilst others have been entirely opportune and lucky.

The accompanying images have extended captions, which discuss the pros and cons of flash angles, lenses and shutter aperture combinations. I have tried to include as much detail as I could remember about the shot.

Martin Edge
Martin.Edge@btinternet.com

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