

David Fleetham

with Peter Rowlands

I think it's fair to say that both you and I are 'of a certain age' having learnt on film and transited to digital. Do you think today's digital only underwater photographers have missed out or benefitted?

They've certainly benefited. It's hard to imagine going back to the days of just 36 exposures per dive—not to mention the uncertainty of whether the image in my mind had actually been captured on that tiny strip of chemically treated film. The instant gratification of digital photography—being able to say, “That’s it, I got the shot,” and immediately move on to the next subject—is truly invaluable. And if the shot isn’t quite right, I can keep shooting until it is.

What newer photographers may have missed out on, however, is the tactile satisfaction of physically discarding a slide that didn’t make the cut—dropping it into an actual trashcan, rather than simply dragging a bunch of pixels to the virtual one.

Did anything in your upbringing or education indicate that underwater photography would become such a big part of your life?

While attending high school in Ontario, Canada, I had little interest in photography on land. My parents owned cameras and often captured family moments on Kodachrome, so I had a general awareness of the photographic process, but it didn’t spark a passion at the time.

I became a certified diver through an unusual setup—a bicycle shop had a small collection of scuba gear tucked away in the back. My checkout dive took place in a cold, man-made lake, clad in a wetsuit. After graduation, I worked and saved to join my best friend, Peter Fiell, in the Grenadine Islands of the Caribbean.

Inspired by the films of Jacques Cousteau, I felt a strong, almost unexplainable urge to return home with underwater photographs of my own. The local camera store recommended a Nikonos camera, which was standard for underwater photography at the time. But I was more drawn to the idea of using an SLR—something that allowed me to



A split image of a diver with an Ikelite camera housing system below a dive vessel on Finger Reef, in Apra Harbor, Guam, Micronesia, Mariana Islands, Philippines Sea. Canon EOS R5, Ikelite housing, 8-15mm lens at 15mm. Two Ikelite DS161 strobes. 1/5000th sec @ F10. ISO 1000.



*A California sea lion, *Zalophus californianus*, playing in a kelp forest off Santa Barbara Island, California, USA. Canon EOS 5D, Ikelite housing, 15mm lens. Two Ikelite DS161 strobes. 1/60th sec @ F11. ISO 640.*

see exactly what I was focusing on and ensure sharp results. I ultimately chose a Minolta paired with an Ikelite housing, and that decision marked the true beginning of my journey into underwater imagery.

Did diving and underwater photography start together and in terms of learning were you self taught?

After spending three months in the Caribbean, I returned to my small, landlocked hometown

and soon decided to relocate to Vancouver—my birthplace and, more importantly, a city with access to an ocean, even if a much colder one. Growing up, my family subscribed to National Geographic, and I would study the underwater images in its pages, along with those in various dive magazines. These visual inspirations continually pushed me to improve my own photography beneath the surface. In that sense, I was entirely self-taught.

I quickly landed a job at a local dive shop and



*A giant Pacific octopus, *Enteroctopus dofleini*, and a diver (MR) on a wall in British Columbia, Canada. Canon EOS R5, Ikelite housing, 100mm macro lens. Two Ikelite DS161 strobes. 1/125th sec @ F14. ISO 160.*

seized every opportunity to get in the water. Gary Mallander, the shop manager who hired me, had recently taken renowned underwater photographer David Doubilet diving to document marine life in the Pacific Northwest. Doubilet's April 1980 article

in National Geographic, titled “Unexpected Glory in Canada’s Cold Seas,” sparked a deeper curiosity in me to shoot the Pacific Northwest.

Over the next six years, I had the good fortune to dive and photograph marine environments ranging from Washington’s San Juan Islands to the northern tip of Vancouver Island and up to the Queen Charlotte Islands. During that period, I transitioned from using a Minolta to a Canon F1 equipped with an optional enlarged viewfinder—widely considered one of the best systems available at the time. That camera was in my luggage when I moved to Hawaii in 1986, marking the beginning of a new chapter in both my diving and photographic journey.

Was your early underwater photography driven by the need to communicate?

Getting scuba tanks filled was the common thread that brought underwater photographers together at the dive shop, and it didn’t take long for me to become part of that community. Once or twice a month, we would gather for slideshow nights to share our latest work, exchange ideas, and enjoy each other’s



company. We frequently chartered boats or organized trips to dive resorts along the coast, building both our portfolios and lasting friendships. Many of those early connections have endured, and I’m still in touch with several of those photographers to this day.

At what point did you find that your images had a value financially?

In the beginning, my primary goal was to land a cover on Canadian DIVER magazine. It was the highest-paying opportunity at the time and served as my



introduction to the potential of selling underwater images. After relocating to Maui in 1986, I began establishing relationships with stock agencies across the United States, and eventually expanded those connections internationally. I was fortunate to be actively involved in three decades of strong and consistent photography sales.

Did this new found possibility of value lead you to going on subject driven dive trips to shoot rare creatures underwater?

Cold water diving in British

Columbia was always a quest for unique marine subjects. I was fortunate to be part of a generous and knowledgeable dive community that openly shared locations known for specific wildlife encounters. This led me to explore dive sites up and down the coast in search of sea lions, wolf eels, gorgonian corals, giant Pacific octopuses, and those rare days with 100-foot visibility.

My early years in Hawaii followed a similar path. As I became more familiar with my new surroundings, I made it a point to dive across all the islands, seeking out encounters with Hawaiian monk seals, schooling hammerhead sharks, and various marine mammals that frequent these subtropical waters.

Were you operating in a bubble or were you part of a group of underwater photographers in those days?

I’ve been fortunate to connect with other photographers wherever I’ve lived. In Vancouver, I found a strong sense of community through the dive shop where I worked and through word-of-mouth—well before the era of cell phones and Facebook groups. During my decade there, I formed lasting friendships, many of which continue today as we reunite for dive trips around the world.

When I moved to Maui in 1986,

the community was small and close-knit, working in that era of film. As my work began to gain more exposure and appear in publications, my network naturally expanded. Visiting photographers often reached out ahead of their trips for local insights, and with each new project, those connections grew into a broader, more collaborative community.

Prior to relocating to Guam, I had the opportunity to meet many photographers from around Micronesia during trips to the island of Yap, where I helped host guests during MantaFest—a two-week photography workshop organized by the Manta Ray Bay Resort. On several returns to Hawaii, I would stop in Guam to dive and co-lead seminars with Tim Rock, coordinated by Lee Webber of MDA (Micronesian Divers Association).

Since settling in Guam, I've continued to build strong relationships within the local underwater photography scene. One passionate member of the community, Steven Wolborsky, recently founded the Guam Underwater Photographic Society. I'm excited to support its growth and contribute in any way I can.

How did your work with National Geographic come about and was it all you hoped?

The late Jim Watt was an outstanding underwater photographer and a generous mentor to many—particularly during the pivotal transition from film to digital photography. Based on the Big Island of Hawaii, Jim and I would often meet there to take advantage of the calm waters off the Kona coast, renowned for its abundance of marine mammals.

At one point, National Geographic commissioned Jim to photograph the installation of an experimental wave energy buoy off the North Shore of Oahu. The assignment was postponed several times, and when the final date was confirmed, Jim happened to be in Indonesia on an extended trip. He graciously passed the opportunity on to me—a gesture for which I remain deeply grateful. That project introduced me to a world where budgets for travel and production appeared nearly limitless.

Of course, the media landscape has changed significantly since then, particularly with the decline in print readership and National Geographic's acquisition by Disney. Nonetheless, that

A commercial hard hat diver (MR) welding a massive wave energy buoy off Kaneohe Bay, Oahu. The 40-kW experimental buoy, employs the bobbing motion of the buoy to drive an electrical generator, that then sends power to the island via underwater cable, Hawaii. Canon EOS 5D MkIV, Ikelite housing, 16-35mm lens at 35mm. Two Ikelite DS161 strobes. 1/100th sec @ F11. ISO 640.





*Reef manta rays, Mobula alfredi, attempting to mate, Yap, Micronesia. This species was previously Manta alfredi.
Canon EOS R5, Ikelite housing, 8-15mm lens at 15mm. Two Ikelite DS161 strobes. 1/400th sec @ F11. ISO 320.*

assignment marked a highlight in my career and remains one of the most memorable opportunities I've had.

You moved to Hawaii in 1986. Was this a deliberate career move and what does Hawaii offer in terms of diving, conditions and subjects all year round?

A diving instructor friend from Vancouver assembled a group of investors to purchase Central Pacific Divers in Lahaina. They developed a small boutique hotel and relocated

the groups 48-foot sailboat to Maui. In need of someone to live aboard the vessel and work at the dive shop, they offered me the position — and I accepted quickly. I thought it would be a great way to spend a year.

The sailboat was moored in sixty feet of water just offshore from town, and during whale season, I was often awakened in the middle of the night by the haunting, powerful songs of humpback whales. At times, the sound was so intense it caused the hull to vibrate.



*This great white shark, Carcharodon carcharias, was photographed just below the surface off Guadalupe Island, Mexico.
Canon EOS 5D, Ikelite housing, 16-35mm lens at 22mm. Two Ikelite DS161 strobes. 1/200th sec @ F11. ISO 320.*

That one year passed quickly—and so did the sailboat, the dive shop, and eventually the hotel itself, which was tragically lost in the devastating Lahaina fire shortly before I left the island.

Over the course of my 38 years on Maui, I worked with several dive companies and earned my U.S. Coast Guard captain's license. As photography became my full-time career, the dive charter business gradually became part of my past.

Hawai'i is often overlooked as a

premier dive destination, frequently seen instead as a gateway to the South Pacific. While it may not have the same reputation as more tropical locales, diving in Hawai'i offers its own unique advantages and challenges.

Diving is possible year-round, although the waters are considered subtropical, with temperatures occasionally dipping into the low 70s°F (around 21°C). Due to the islands' extreme isolation — rising as volcanic peaks in the heart of the Pacific Ocean — the range of marine



Pygmy killer whale, Feresa attenuata, also known as the slender blackfish or the slender pilot whale, Hawaii. Canon EOS 20D, Ikelite housing, 10-20mm lens at 10mm. Two Ikelite DS161 strobes. 1/125th sec @ F9. ISO 200.

life is limited to species that could reach these remote shores. However, this isolation has led to a remarkably high percentage of endemic species, found nowhere else on Earth.

In addition to its distinctive biodiversity, Hawai'i offers exceptional opportunities to encounter marine mammals and experience the increasingly popular blackwater diving, making it a destination well worth exploring for underwater photographers and divers.

You must have been one of the most successful stock photographers in your day. Was it the lucrative wild west that has now all but dried up or is there hope of a new level of value?

Looking back, it truly felt like the Wild West. If I knew then what I know now, I would have approached certain things differently—but that's all water under the bridge.

In the days of film, producing a strong

underwater image was a real challenge. With only 36 exposures per roll and no way of knowing if anything turned out until days or even a week later, the process required both skill and patience. The advent of digital photography has dramatically changed the landscape. The volume and quality of underwater imagery have increased exponentially, making it far more accessible to capture compelling shots.

Like any product, the sale of images is subject to the laws of supply and demand. As the supply of high-quality underwater photos has surged, prices have inevitably declined. Having worked in this field for over 40 years, I still find it worthwhile. However, for someone just entering the industry today, it would be considerably more difficult to justify the expenses relative to the potential income in today's market.

How has your equipment use developed over the years. Are you dominated by it or is it just a tool for the job?

The camera, strobes, and housing have always been essential tools of the trade. In the early days, there were only a few systems that dominated the market—tools of choice for serious underwater photographers. Back then, everything was manual: focusing the lens, advancing the film frame by frame.

Things began to change with the advent of autofocus, and then transformed dramatically with the rise of digital photography. Over the past 23 years, I've upgraded to new camera models more times than I can count. Each time, I think, this is it—how could it possibly get better? And yet, somehow, it always does.

That said, I feel that way now with my current

Canon R5. The image quality is outstanding, and for the first time in a long while, I might actually skip the R5 Mark II. However, for those who shoot fast-moving subjects—like birds in flight—the Mark II is definitely worth considering.

Do you feel that underwater photography so far has done a good job in helping awareness of our oceans or are there better ways or techniques to spread the word.

Underwater imagery has long served as a vital avenue for raising awareness among those who are landlocked or may never experience the ocean firsthand. As the volume of underwater photography has grown exponentially, it has helped bring the wonders of the marine world to a broader audience—many of whom might otherwise never glimpse the beauty that lies beneath the waves.

Social media platforms and publications like this one continue to amplify that message, shining a spotlight on the ocean's fragile ecosystems. We can only hope that this growing visibility inspires meaningful change and a collective commitment to protecting the health of our oceans—upon which all life depends.

You are a fan of blackwater photography underwater. Does this appeal technically, photographically or marine biologically, or all three?

Traditionally, new divers are often advised to master their fundamental diving skills before attempting underwater photography—and with good reason. Although today, it's not uncommon to see divers with limited control or poor buoyancy skills attempting to manage complex camera systems. However, this is something I've never



*Komodo dragons, **Varanus komodoensis**, are the worlds largest lizards. Rinca Island, Komodo National Park, Indonesia. Canon EOS 40D, Ikelite housing, 10-22mm lens at 10mm. Two Ikelite DS161 strobes. 1/250th sec @ F11. ISO 200.*

observed on a blackwater dive.

Drifting miles offshore at night, suspended in the open ocean with a group of divers and a only a few lights tethered to a line, is not an environment suited to everyone and especially not a novice. Blackwater diving is one of the most demanding conditions in which to create an image, but when everything aligns and the shot comes together it is most rewarding. That's what keeps drawing me back.

It's not a pursuit for everyone who's ever exhaled through a regulator. But for those who venture into this alien-like realm—right here on our own planet—it offers a truly otherworldly perspective.



*These two bigfin reef squid, **Sepioteuthis lessoniana**, were photographed at night in the Philippines. These are also known as oval squid.*

Canon EOS R5, Ikelite housing, 100mm macro lens. Two Ikelite DS161 strobes. 1/160th sec @ F22. ISO 160.

Would you like to offer advice to anyone today who wants to be involved full time and earn a sensible living from underwater photography or is it best to keep it in it's box and stick to the day job?

The phrase “a sensible living” means something different to everyone. If the ocean is your passion, I would never discourage you from pursuing your vision—whatever shape that may take. Personally, I won't be traveling to my next diving destination on my private jet. In fact, I don't plan to retire in the traditional sense at all. I'll simply continue photographing the ocean and building my image library. When my partner, Jennifer, and I aren't immersed in reliving what we saw on our last dive, we're planning for the next one.

If your goal is that private jet, it's worth considering whether today's image licensing and marketing landscape is the right path. There are many other avenues to building wealth—ones that could still allow you to explore the underwater



*This green sea turtle, *Chelonia mydas*, an endangered species, is having its shell cleaned by a school of goldring surgeonfish, *Ctenochaetus strigosus*, off Maui, Hawaii. Canon EOS 5D, Ikelite housing, 15mm lens. Two Ikelite DS161 strobes. 1/100th sec @ F11. ISO 160.*

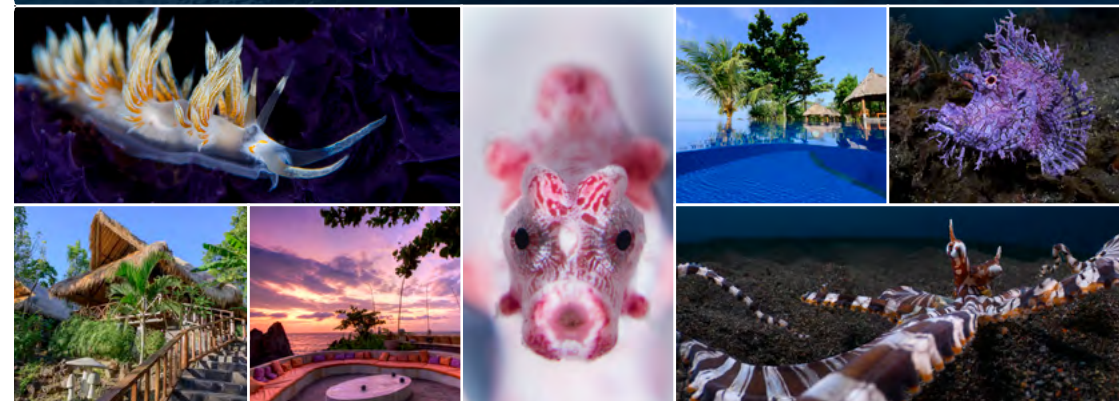
world with a camera in hand. Choose your path thoughtfully.

David, thank you very much for taking the time to provide such informative and insightful answers and also for your extensive contributions to the magazine over many years.

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