

The only way is ethics

by Gal Kahn

Underwater wildlife photography is a specific niche within wildlife photography therefore, most guidelines for wildlife photography apply for, and get amplified underwater.

As a marine biologist, one of my leading principles when I pick up my camera is the “fly on the wall” concept- causing as little disturbance as possible. Following this guideline allows the animals around me to feel safe, and provide me with opportunities to capture natural behavior shots and get to know WHO they are rather than only WHAT they are.

As a wildlife photographer both on land and underwater, I’ve learned that in the watery world we are presented with bigger challenges in terms of gear, skills and opportunities. In this environment, we are completely foreign, and subtle changes in our behavior can dramatically affect animals, and the photos we capture of them.

However, the reward we get from an exciting underwater encounter is something that cannot be explained to those who haven’t experienced it by themselves.

What Makes Underwater Wildlife Photography Different

Wildlife photography on land and underwater have many differences. On land, for example, we can sometimes camouflage ourselves or hide from our subjects and wait for hours in the same spot. Underwater, however, this is virtually impossible; the animal will almost always notice us, so it’s much more crucial that we convey calmness and pure intentions, otherwise we might scare it away.

Swimming not directly towards the subject and avoiding sharp movements usually help, but every species behaves and reacts differently and has its own body language, so I’d recommend learning the details about our subjects beforehand.

Secondly, underwater we can usually get much closer to wildlife than on land. This is exciting but also presents us with a big responsibility to know the limits and not get too close. In almost all cases, if possible, it’s best to spot the animal from a distance, try to anticipate its direction of movement, position ourselves accordingly and let it come to us.

In addition, there are a few more



factors that apply underwater that we must consider: marine animals perceive us differently; we bring with us foreign microbiome and skin oils from land; our bubbles may deter some animals; this world is much more three-dimensional than what we’re used to; stress signals and body language are often subtle and could be missed.

How Competitions and Social Media Affect Our Ethics

Today, we live in a world with increased social pressure to get “the perfect shot”. Driven either by likes and exposure on social media or by





awards and recognition from photo competitions, photographers might be tempted to push ethical limits and chase winning shots at the expense of stress to wildlife.

Competitions and social media are not the problem by themselves, but if they reward shots that include invasive angles, animal handling, or other misguided behaviors, they normalize them and put pressure on other photographers to recreate them.

Over time, as knowledge and awareness grew, many competitions and professional platforms incorporated ethical behavior rules that participants must disclose. This is good and a step in the right direction,

but in many cases it's still largely dependent on the photographers' honesty.

Many experts and judges could recognize stress signals in some animals. However, even for them, it might prove difficult or even impossible to recognize them in macro shots or rare subjects. Not to mention social media, which doesn't even have such ethics rules. Therefore, the responsibility still lies with us, the photographers, to keep our ethical code and be honest about it. Even if no one is around, and we're the only ones who can ever know what really happens, our moral code still applies. So, in addition to asking ourselves

"can I get closer?" we should also ask "should I?".

Invisible Pressure on Dive Guides: Expectations vs Responsibility

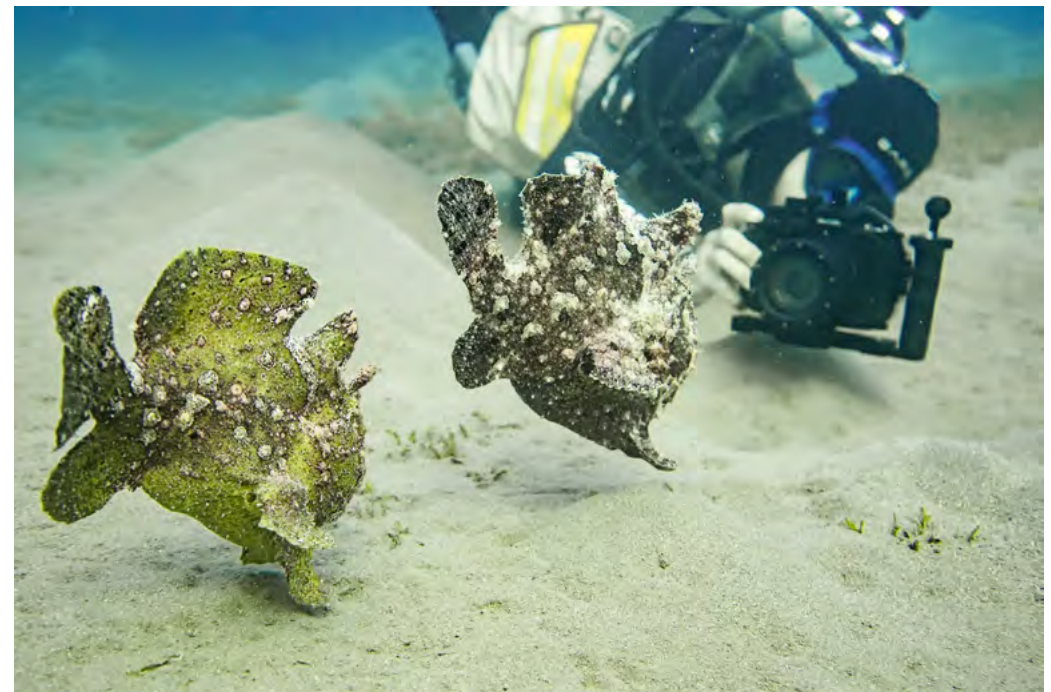
The internet is a great tool for getting information and preparing for dives. We can learn about dive sites, which animals can be found in them, and even get pro-tips like on which specific algae to look for a special nudibranch, or how to read the body language of sharks.

That said, I still think there is no replacement for local dive guides who can share from their experience

and take us personally for a tour in their own home-turf. However, this may create problematic situations for them.

Many times, the social pressure (as discussed in the previous section) is transferred onto guides, as photographers arrive with a target species list, limited time and high expectations.

Usually, dive guides are locals who depend on dive tourism for livelihood, and therefore, understandably, strive to get good reviews, recommendations and tips. Because of this, putting guides under pressure to "deliver" might cause them to resort to flushing animals



from hiding, touching or repositioning subjects, and engaging in other unethical behavior.

All divers, including dive guides, are responsible for their own actions. But this dynamic gives us, photographers, extra responsibility as well as the power to shape this culture. We should make it clear to our guides that we value respect to wildlife, and reward knowledge, skills and patience, not forced encounters. Moreover, we must remember that in nature, encounters are ultimately a matter of luck, and our dive guides can't control nature. Therefore, we should always give reviews, tips and recommendations based on our

experience with the guide, not based on natural encounters.

By doing these things, we can reinforce positive dive culture and allow our guides to behave ethically without fearing for their livelihood.

Scuba vs Freediving: Advantages and Disadvantages

Disclaimer: as a person who has experience in photographing both while using scuba and freediving, I'll share some of my opinions and insights. However, it's important to remember that this is based on my experience and personal preferences; different things may work for different

people in different situations.

The biggest advantage of diving using scuba is longer bottom time. It allows us to move more slowly, spend more time continuously underwater, and notice more small details. This is especially useful for macro photography, while looking for beautiful tiny critters in the reef. However, it also involves bulky (and expensive) gear, noisy breathing and bubbles which may be intimidating for some larger animals.

Freediving, on the other hand, requires no bulky gear. Furthermore, it allows us to have a much more silent approach, being perceived as just another animal underwater instead of

an intruder in a spacesuit.

In my experience, the bigger inhabitants of the sea are usually calmer when I'm gliding on a single breath, allowing me to get closer and have better interactions with them (resulting in better photos as well). In addition, the face-down surface time between dives allows us to cover more distance, have more mobility and a larger field of view, increasing our chances to spot larger animals. However, naturally, the one-breath approach shortens our dive time, which can result in shorter interaction windows and a temptation to rush the shot.

Diving Skills Before the Camera

Being a good underwater photographer means first being a good diver, no matter the type of diving we choose. If we use scuba- we should have excellent (if not perfect) buoyancy, awareness and other scuba skills. If we freedive- we should have great technique and control, and know our limits very well.

As a former instructor, I've seen many beginners go diving with cameras, and completely forget all the basics the moment a turtle or an octopus appears. Holding a camera is a mental distraction, which amplifies mistakes. Therefore, before we even consider bringing it underwater, diving must become a second nature to us.

Mastering diving skills first is important not only for our own safety, but also for the safety of the reef and the marine wildlife. Not doing so may also result in behavior that may frighten our subjects and cause us to lose the photo opportunities, like sharp movements, kicking up sand, etc.

Common Mistakes and Ethical Tips Underwater

Over the years as an underwater photographer, I've made mistakes and



watched other people make mistakes that resulted in stress to wildlife and questionable situations. The biggest one is chasing the animal. Especially as beginners, sometimes adrenaline gets the best of us, and we're tempted to chase our subject to get more shots.

When the animal has had enough, it's important that we DON'T chase it. This would only cause additional stress to the animal, would not result in a good photo, and let's be honest- we don't have a real chance of keeping up with most animals underwater anyways.

The second common mistake I've seen is getting too close to subjects



or hovering over them, thinking that closer is always better. We must remember that they are the locals, and we are the visitors in their natural environment. Therefore, their needs should be valued more than our desire for a good shot.

Ethics Specific to Scuba Diving and Macro Photography

In addition to the ones mentioned before, scuba diving and macro photography have some extra ethical points worth discussing.

Unlike larger animals, macro critters usually can't escape us by simply swimming away. Some

are forced to hide within corals or crevices, while others (like nudibranchs) aren't quick enough to do even that. If our subject went into hiding, as scuba divers, we could hover around, sticking our head in weird places for a chance to spot it again. Goes without saying that this kind of behavior causes additional stress to the animal that is hiding from us, and to other organisms we might not even know are there (on top of maybe being unsafe for us as well). If we scare away our subject, the best strategy would usually be swimming a few meters away, putting some distance between us and it, and waiting patiently.



This way, if we behave like a “fly on the wall”, the subject might feel comfortable enough to come back out of hiding and provide us with a great encounter.

Another consideration in scuba is due to its longer bottom time. Because of it, we may be tempted by behaviors like touching the bottom or corals for stability, manipulating animals to get the perfect angle and composition, moving subjects onto “better” backgrounds, etc.

However, we must remember that underwater environments, especially coral reefs, are very fragile to outside effects. As mentioned before, touching marine organisms means exposing them to our

microbiome and skin oils, the consequences of which we don’t yet entirely understand. Furthermore, we don’t know the full extent of how manipulating them might impact their future survival chances.

Small organisms have small energy reserves, and if we move them too far away, they might not be able to make it back. Also, handling them might cause a stress response which could attract predators or harm them in another way. In the macro world, manipulation is usually easy, invisible to the audience, and subjects are often too small to protest. For these reasons, macro photography is where our ethics are tested the most, and our responsibility is the greatest.

Ethics Specific to Freediving and Approaching Larger Animals

All the ethics points mentioned above apply also for freediving. However, by its very nature, it involves much more movement than scuba diving, especially in the vertical axis. For this reason, it has some of its own specific behavioral considerations.

The biggest and most common mistake I see beginners do is descending directly over their subject. When approached from above, most animals would feel threatened and escape, resulting in stress to them and a missed opportunity for us. So, the best approach in most cases would be from the front or side of the subject, descending a few meters away from it, allowing it to see us continuously, making horizontal movements only when we reach its eye level. This way, if we move in a slow and calm manner, we maximize our chances not to be perceived as a threat, giving the animal the option to stick around and allow us to peak into its world.

What Ethical Underwater Photography Gives Back

Considering everything that has been discussed, we can probably agree that ethical behavior

underwater has positive effects on us as well as on the animals and their environment.

Underwater, calmness is key- if we don’t chase, minimize disturbance and convey tranquility, we increase our chances to get repeated encounters. This, in turn, increases our chances to capture more authentic shots, get to know the animals and their stories better, and increase long-term conservation efforts.

Ultimately, animals that feel safe allow us to get closer, stay longer, and witness their true selves.

Gal Kahn
Instagram

