

Mind your camera manners

Diving etiquette for photographers (and non-photographers!)

by Beth and Shaun Tierney

Sometimes a small thing can make a huge impression. We were perusing a foreign language dive magazine when we came across a photo that left us breathless. Not because it was beautiful, or technically perfect, but because of what it showed. Two smiling divers, standing on a jetty. One was proudly holding a giant clam and a camera sat at their feet.

We couldn't believe what we were seeing. What were they going to do with the poor creature - a living animal in it's death throes? Surely like us, they had been taught not to touch anything in case it was dangerous, poisonous or fragile. We've all heard the "don't do this, don't do that" dive briefings, but we have never been on one that said "bring up whatever you fancy, wreck the reef a little while you're on the go".

What made it all worse was that they were obviously photographers of enough standing (well, enough money to buy a housing) to have known better.

No doubt every photographer has been on a boat when someone has moaned about having to put up with them and, after incidents like that one, you can understand why. Our stuff's in their way, we hog all the space, we want special treatment. Yes, it's all true. We have a lot invested in that camera kit and we feel it deserves respect. And unfortunately, some underwater photographers care less than they should about the



Good buoyancy control keeps you exactly where you should be.



Resting fins and hands on the reef may cause damage, unless you know precisely what you are resting on.

marine environment, which causes further dissension with their new buddies.

They're so focussed on the task in hand that they simply forget the old rules of courteous and careful diving.

Getting the picture shouldn't mean damaging the environment:

Carrying a camera and flashes completely changes the way we dive. With your eye glued to the viewfinder, awareness of your surroundings



Put one finger down to balance over a poisonous sea snake....but picking up could be asking for trouble.



and the ability to judge distance goes up the spout. Consequently, many a photographer has been sighted with his grubby mitts on the coral and plenty of cross words get aired back on the boat. However, what everyone needs to appreciate is that there are times when you can touch stuff down there without doing either it, or yourself any harm.

Generally, the average photographer tends to be far more knowledgeable than the average diver having learnt to define what is what in his quest for subject matter. Because so much of the underwater

world is either dangerous, poisonous or fragile (or all of the above) there is much to be said for looking closely at the reef and working out what isn't.

Right beside what looks like a bunch of coral may be some rather pretty looking algae. If you are forced to put a finger down for balance, look for the algae where the effect of your touch is minimal, but remember to really look.

We once stared long and hard at a patch of reddish algae with a nudibranch on it, before recognising that beside the nudi was another well camouflaged critter. Our movements had awakened the fiery temper of a deadly blue-ringed octopus. Sandy patches or dead coral rocks are good contenders for a place to rest and look for a photo opportunity except when these things can turn out to stingrays or stone fish in disguise!

Hassle the marine life and they might hassle you back ...

Sadly though, there are those like the couple at the start of this tale, that still haven't learnt respect. And they are an embarrassment to the cause - the reason that non-camera carriers grow to dislike the rest of us. There are far too many tales of photographers or divemasters moving critters from their homes to achieve the perfect shot. Lifting a seahorse from its holdfast to capture it against a clear background may look nice on film but may also mean that it never finds it's way home again, losing its mate and its young in the process.

Even 'playing' with a tiny clown fish can backfire. He'll leap out and bite your finger without caring about the consequences - usually because he's a she and being fiercely protective of her brood. It's perfectly normal to wave your hand over the syphons of a giant clam and watch it open and close, but pull it up from the bottom? Good grief.

... as might your fellow divers.

Of course some photographers get so wound up in what they are doing they simply forget that they don't own the ocean. Hogging the lone frogfish on a dive and not letting other divers even get a glimpse of the chap sitting on his sponge is just plain mean. We once spent a dive trip with a whole group - two outnumbered Brits amongst a gregarious group with more cameras between them than actual divers.



A deadly blue ringed octopus will only show it's true colours - and location - if disturbed

After getting pretty frustrated at their finders keepers attitude, and a couple of sharp words on both sides, we instigated the six frame rule.

If you find it, you get to shoot off six frames, then pass the subject over to whoever is else nearby. Once everyone nearby has had a look or taken a shot, you can go back. After all, critters rarely disappear, they are loyal to their homes and will hang around for the full photo shoot. This system improves the dive as a whole - as people become more willing to share their finds, everyone has more fun.

Don't forget why you are there in the first place

Safety, as ever, should be paramount in any diver's mind, and it IS too easy to get completely caught up in finishing a film. Diving that little bit too deep to chase a shark, zig-zagging up and down to see subjects or simply staying long enough to start sucking rust is crazy. Good buoyancy is more



Camera tables keep kit where it should be but are off limits to wet stuff

important than any other dive skill we have ever learnt. Being able to hover effortlessly over a black coral tree so that you can focus on the long nosed hawkfish inside it, is an amazingly useful knack and worth perfecting. Consider your actions with the camera and don't get so caught up that you endanger the very environment you came to admire.

And the other side of the lens:

Getting criticised as photographers seems to be coming more common. Boat operators love to give you a hard time if you leave kit around, yet always expect some free images to promote their cruises. Other passengers love to moan about the kit, the fact that we get a separate dip tank or even an extra shelf to charge up batteries. Is that why they feel the need to put their wet gloves on top of the electrical chargers?

And dip their toothpaste-impregnated masks

in the tank with our very expensive cameras?

Well guys, feel free to blow yourself up, although truthfully, we would rather you didn't use our chargers to do it with... and as to dip tanks, the reason why you are asked not to rinse your mask in with the cameras is because it's possible that toothpaste or mask clear might damage the camera's o-rings or your watch may scratch a dome port. And yes, we invested a lot of money in that kit so surely having one bucket for us and one for you isn't that much of a problem?

A different point of view

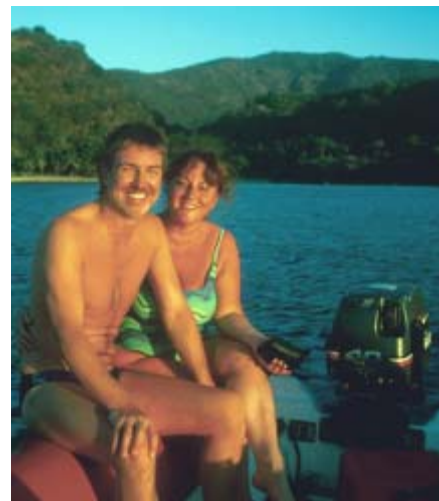
We photo nuts love what we do - being able to capture just a little of the emotion of the dive

is a wonderful feeling, and yes, we need to continually remind ourselves to take more care and be more considerate of the environment and our buddies. And you non-photo guys, well you just love to look at what we do. It's why you're reading this, why you get a monthly subscription to your favourite printed magazine and definitely why you drop hints on which latest coffee table book you want for Christmas. Compromise is important in all things and especially in this. Be nice to the guy who took the manta ray photo and you may just find he'll email you a copy.

Few photographers and divers go down with the intention of ruining each other's fun and while at times it may seem that we all have have

completely different objectives, in reality we are there for the same reason - to view, admire and enjoy the environment we are visiting.

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