

Ring of Confidence

By Mark Webster

Imagine you are cruising the reef with your trusty housing and 105mm macro lens looking for small critters to fill the frame. Your patience is rewarded when you spot the most gorgeous triple fin blenny sitting in the perfect position in a small crack in the reef. You approach slowly thinking about lighting angles and avoiding shadows and begin to adjust your flash arms, loosening fittings or creaking your bendy arms into position. Adjust the aperture as you raise the camera to focus on the blenny and approach slowly - at that moment the blenny high tails it leaving only a puff of dust suspended in the water!

How often has this happened to you and why won't these fish co-operate and sit still?! The answer, for me, lies partly in the appearance of not only the camera and diver behind it but also the looming flash guns which are threatening to attack from the side. There is an answer to this problem but it flies in the face of one of the most basic lighting principles we have learnt in underwater photography.

I can recall several days way back in 1992 when I struggled to translate a German article in the now defunct UWF magazine which described the first commercially available ring flash made by housing manufacturer UK Germany. I seem to remember that Helmut Debelius had been using one for small fish photography, but at the time I naively dismissed the idea - surely this could only work in gin clear water otherwise all you will get is a frame full of the dreaded backscatter? Perhaps I should have improved my German at the time, but I forgot the idea until Visions in the Sea in 1999 when I listened to Martin Edge talk about his experiments with a ring flash



prototype. This set me thinking again and I determined to experiment myself.

Before making a leap in the dark I decided to utilise some existing equipment and satisfy myself that this 'flat lighting' technique would work. My assumption was that backscatter may not be such a problem due to the extremely narrow angle of view of the 105mm or 180/200mm macro lenses and the proximity of the light source to the lens itself. With the aid of a small, sculpted port for my 105mm lens (courtesy of BSoUP member Ken Sullivan) I mounted two YS30's either side of the port

and set to work in my local, and turbid, waters of Falmouth Bay. The results were excellent and I also discovered the joy of a compact point and shoot system, which seemed to be spooking the fish far less even with my clumsy approaches.

This was inevitably going to lead to an investment in equipment and it was at this point I happened to visit Ocean Optics and mentioned my attempts over a cup of coffee. With a flourish, Steve Warren produced a box from behind the counter containing what appeared to be the solution - a port mounted quad flash from Inon in Japan. This



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was the only unit in the UK at the time and Steve convinced me that he had been saving this especially for me and suggested that I test it before coming to a decision - he had seen the look in my eyes and knew that I had already succumbed!

I have now been using the Inon Quad flash for nearly two years and can honestly say that it has been a revelation. Combined with my Subal housing and F90X the rig is compact and just slightly negative so it handles more like a Nikonos set up than a housing. Subjects which had eluded me in the past are much more approachable and there is nothing more to think of except stalking them - if you can see it through the viewfinder you know that you can



light it even in the back of a hole - real WYSIWYG photography! The unit even has a focus light which comes on as you touch the shutter - this is more than bright enough, but it will eat the four AA batteries, so use sparingly or be prepared to use a new set with each film. I shoot mostly on TTL which is very accurate, although there is the choice of full, 1/2 and 1/4 manual powers and even a rotating mask which allows you to block one or two of the four flash tubes to create shadow and get creative.

I have also found that larger fish are also much more approachable and the lighting is excellent for those classic fish portraits with either a black or blue water background. Shooting at a

distance of up to 1m (3ft) in reasonably clear water produces little or no backscatter, so you have to re-think those accepted basic rules we have all learnt about lighting angles. The lighting produced by quad flash may not appear to suit everyone, but the advantages far outweigh the drawbacks for me - so beware, if you are tempted to try one, you may get hooked!

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