

Reef hooks

by

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Our first encounter with ‘real’ sharks beyond the usual white tip reef variety was in Papua New Guinea. It is a wild and untamed country both above and below the water and as the six of us dropped to the reef below the fin down was pretty hard as the current was running.

The huge array of sea fans and Dendronephthia bent and swayed in the wind. As we neared 30m shadows of ten to fifteen big sharks danced in the blue, 20m in front of us. A large Grey Reef came over to check us out and two Silkies glided closer. Finning hard to remain stationary I tried to set up to take a few shots with my adrenaline pumping but, with twin strobes stuck out on long arms, the drag was too much for my tiring legs. Sadly, Demelza and I agreed to let the current take us but as we turned to signal to the other four in the group we saw them hovering over the reef like a flock of birds. They all seemed to be tied on to the coral. Intrigued but rather horrified we waved goodbye and enjoyed a pleasant drift dive.

The ‘reef hooks’ that the divers were using were invented by a Japanese diver and they are a piece of dive kit that is now ever present in our BCD pockets. Similar to our initial view of them their use still provokes discussion but we think that, when used properly and sensitively, they have great benefits and also afford extra safety.

Currents are the life blood of the sea and where they run strongly is often where there is the most abundant life. Reef hooks have allowed us to take advantage of this unlike in Papua New Guinea where without them we only managed a



A reef hook is a large shark hook with the barb filed off attached by a length of strong nylon line to any standard gate clip.

Once securely hooked the line takes the strain in the current and, with the addition of some air to the BCD, the diver is held up off the reef below.

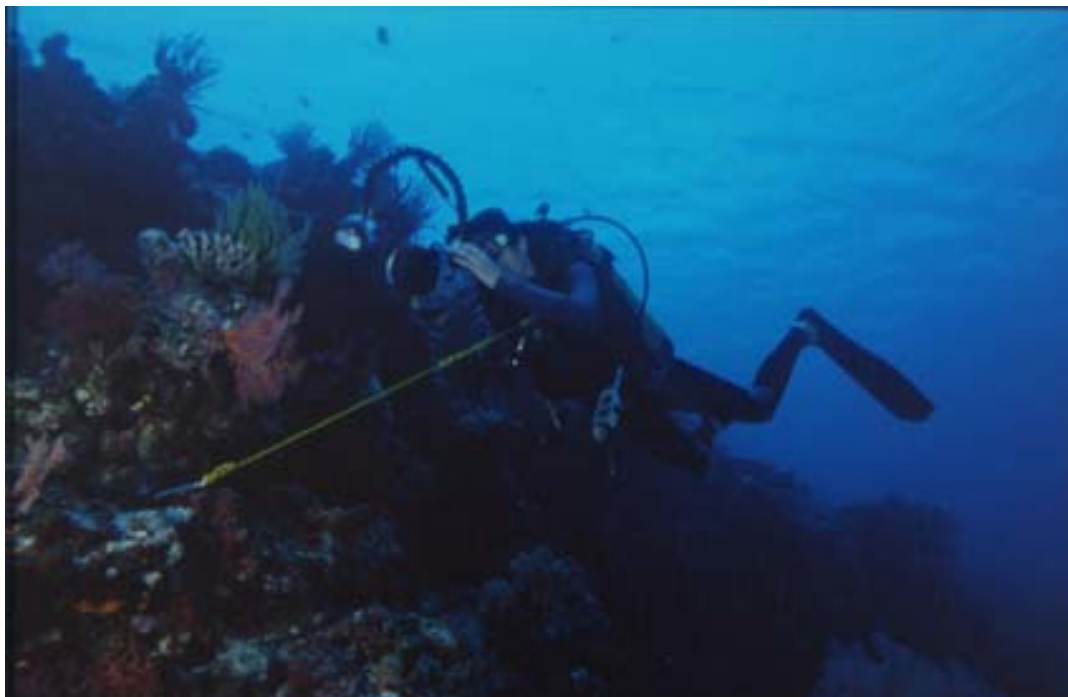


fleeting glimpse.

Reefs come alive when the current starts to flow as food is swept in. Polyps on corals that are normally retracted appear, small fish rise up from the reef to feed in the water column and the big stuff comes in either to feed or just rest. All this produces opportunities for shots not otherwise available and I know from experience how trying on both air and patience even a small current can be when attempting to compose a shot. By hooking in we have even been able to get great macro shots on strong drift dives.

A very simple device, it is a

large shark hook with the barb filed off attached by a length of strong nylon line to any standard gate clip or such like. Used correctly it is straight forward but there are a few things to be aware of. The clip needs to be attached to the BCD on a D-ring as near to the centre of the chest as possible. This D-ring should be steel for strength. On an area of reef that is fairly flat or protrudes from the wall the hook is attached to an area of rock or dead coral. This can be tricky as dead coral is brittle and can be weak. Once securely hooked the line takes the strain in the current and, with the addition of some air to the



With both hands free and the strain of finning removed, concentration can be put into getting the shots.

A little air in your BCD will lift you off the reef.

BCD, the diver is held up off the reef below. It feels like flying!

With both hands free and the strain of finning removed, concentration can be put into getting the shots. Although the positioning might seem somewhat static for good composition there is quite a lot of 'gliding' latitude available with 3m of line remembering though that the adage 'get close' still applies. If the positioning on the reef turns out not to be correct the hook can be removed and another spot found, remembering to release the extra buoyancy in the BCD first.

The dive site where the reef hook is used more than anywhere else in the world is Blue Corner in Palau, Micronesia. So much so in fact that you actually do a PADI 'Blue Corner' specialty which teaches the use of the hook. This is a truly outstanding dive and illustrates quite a few points with this type of diving.

As the name implies the site is a plateau of reef that sticks out from a corner of the reef at about 25m. As the tide runs in and out, the water is forced over this plateau. When it is running, large numbers of sharks come in for a rest gliding up and down the reef edge on the strong up current.

Divers swim down and hook in on the edge, relax and take in the show from touching distance. Not everyone however has a hook and we witnessed a party of 8 divers all lying flat across the reef holding on with their gloved hands. As you can imagine the rock along the top of the reef is pretty bare of life. If you have reef hook in your pocket it is going to do less damage than holding on and you are raised above the reef.

What goes up must come down and once unhooked the danger of the down current on the other side of Blue Corner needs to be avoided. Up and down currents are not uncommon on many reefs as we have discovered when using our hooks in both the Red Sea and Indonesia and there are stories of divers struggling in strong ones. A reef hook could well help immeasurably if trapped in such a situation.

Some currents get very strong and if your reg starts to free flow with the pressure on the purge button or your mask shifts as you glance at your buddy then it is probably time to go. Like all diving, you get your best shots when you



are relaxed and in control. So give reef hooks a try - they are fun even without a camera but remember, if you do take your camera, attach it securely to your BCD!

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Will & Demelza teach underwater photography at Cornish Diving
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