

Andy Belcher

by Ross Armstrong

New Zealand photographer Andy Belcher has won more than 80 international photographic awards including the Australasian Underwater Photographer of the year title (twice) and overall first at France's Okeanos and Antibes Festivals, California's UPS and New Zealand's Oceans photo competitions and a first place in the 1997 British Wildlife Photographer of the year competition. In the 1994 CMAS international 50 Judges Contest, Andy was named one of the world's top four professional underwater photographers.

What got you started in underwater photography?

Not long after we got married Angie and I went on holiday to Australia and we ended up taking a cheap flight to PNG. We were both divers and that was really our first taste of real tropical diving. I something in my head just went "photos". That's the only way really that I can describe it, I'd hardly ever taken a photo before and knew nothing about photography. When we came home back to New Zealand I decided that I had to take photos underwater.

That was in 1984. I bought a second hand Nikonos IVa with a 35mm lens.

Knowing virtually nothing about photography I went into the water with a Nikonos and set it on automatic and started taking pictures. Most of them were rubbish. Amazingly I actually won a medal at in New Zealand's Oceans



All underwater images taken with Nikon 801s, Nikon 16mm fisheye lens in a Nexus housing with two Nikonos SB104 strobes on TLC arms. Fuji Velvia film rated at 100 asa.

competition with the first roll of film I put through the camera. It was a topside photo of Angie running along the beach with all the water droplets coming down. That

made me all enthusiastic because I thought "Cor, I've only just started and I've won a prize, maybe I can do this photography thing after all".



This shot won a third in the Nikon photo contest international 2001.

Did you upgrade your camera gear as you progressed?

I made a slow progression through to all of the Nikonos lenses, working up to the next expensive one each time. I bought a 28mm because I thought it would be heaps better and it was. I really wanted a 15mm lens but I could not afford one. After a few years I bought a second hand 20mm lens.

I think my photos really started to improve dramatically when I got the 20mm. Most people did not know I was using a 20mm, they thought I was using a 15mm. They made that assumption because some of the shots I was getting with the 20mm were equally as good as what you could get with the 15mm. I updated my strobes so I had a SB102 and SB103, the smaller one was for fill lighting and I started to take much better pictures once I started using that combination.

So I don't think the equipment is absolutely everything. In a lot of situations it can give you an advantage. I think you could buy a Nikonos III, an old style 15mm and one strobe and take some awesome pictures.

With no prior photography knowledge, how did you develop your skills?

I read books. I bought a book by Jim Church called 'The Nikonos Handbook' and I read it from cover to cover again and again and again until I thought I was starting to master that Nikonos system. The technical aspects of photography did not come easy to me; in fact I really struggled. It's only four or five years ago that I've really understood the relationship between apertures and shutter speeds and how they work together.

How important do you think understanding the technical aspect's of photography is?

I think you do need to learn the technical side of photography but I also strongly believe that there is an incredible amount of talent or artistic creativity involved in photography that maybe people overlook. I think I'm quite a creative photographer and I can see a picture before I've taken it.

The hard bit is getting that image onto the film –that takes the

technical skill.

People were saying to me "You're not using TTL are you? - You've got to learn how to do it manually" and I thought "Oh no here we go, I don't even know what a shutter speed is for". But once I forced myself to start doing things manually I got dramatic improvements in my exposures.

How much do you plan shots in advance?

With underwater photography I think you have to be ready and trained to make the best of the moment when it happens. You've got to develop your own technique so that you're ready for what happens or you make it happen to the best of your ability. The difficulty underwater is that things are constantly changing, two days can go by and everything is different – the tide has changed, the fish are doing something else or whatever. Sometimes you can go back and get a shot but really you must try and make the most of each situation as it arises.

What do you look for in a photograph that you are about to take?

To use Darryl Torckler's classic term, I look for the "wow factor".

Sometimes there is a photo to be taken but it doesn't excite me, I can recognise that now. I think in the early days I would just bash away and shoot lots of film. I would keep shooting and bracketing and try different angles. I still do that to a certain degree although more so on a commissioned photo shoot than when I'm shooting for myself.

How much do you follow the accepted rules of composition?

I took a lot of notice of the rules at first. Over and above that I really just experiment. I have always thought outside the norm



Did you make any major break-throughs when you were starting out?

One major break through was when I trained myself not to worry about the cost of film. In the early days we were really struggling financially and I was spending all this money on camera gear, and it was lots. But I would hold myself back on film because I would think it was costing me heaps – so many dollars a roll then the processing and mounting.

Suddenly one day I thought “What the heck”. We were starting to sell a few pictures and I started to shoot everything I wanted to shoot. That’s when I started taking lots more good quality pictures because I was not worried about it.

I think changing to a housed SLR was another break through. It certainly was a break through with composing my shots, because composing wide angle shots with the Nikonos, especially working close is very difficult due to parallax error. When you pick up a housing and you are actually looking through the lens you can see whether your picture is in focus or not.

Do you think you need to shoot a lot of film to get good results?

Within reason, yes. But I think you can get to a stage when you come through that. There is another very common mistake with underwater photographers, which is to swim up to something, take one picture of it and move on. That never ever works. Unless you are incredibly lucky you will never get a good shot like that.

If I see something that I think looks really awesome, I know that if I take the whole roll of film and spend my whole dive here the chances are I will get one really awesome shot.

and if something fits best right in the middle of the frame, that’s the way I shoot it. You can break any of the rules. There is so much creative stuff you can do, not only with composition but also with

techniques such as slow shutter speeds and panning. It allows you to represent how you perceive what you see.



Is there anything that you credit your success to?

Being different with subject matter and composition. Maybe one of the reasons is that I feel I am able to see things that others don't see or at least don't appreciate. Stuff like looking through the surface with the Snell's window effect and reflections. Some people I feel will never ever see that. But I know that moving up or down or by getting into exactly the right spot I will get this awesome reflection. I have trained myself to look for the best angle or the best time to take a shot.

Underwater I think people are afraid to experiment with lighting angles. You've got to get your strobes out and move them around. Very early in my photography I discovered the brilliant results I could get by trying my strobes at different angles.

What advice would you offer someone starting out in underwater photography?

Let your imagination go wild because anything that is out there you can get on film. Train yourself to photograph with your eyes.

Before you ever pick up the camera look at your subject and decide for yourself whether or not it will make a good shot.

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