

Portraits

by Erik Henchoz

I dedicate this article to all the people who love the sea and to all divers who try to take portraits of sea animals with their cameras on every dive; faces, liveries, colors, forms and behaviors that at times surprise and excite.

From a blenny that leans out of its hole to come face to face with a big barracuda or with a grey shark; an infinity of “poses” and of “expressions” show how various sea life is and how fishes have a character, habits and fears of their own.

Just few days ago Ansa (an Italian news agency) published an article referring to a study of the university of Liverpool on the rainbow trout. The study shows how bold, shy or curious these fishes can be according to the various individuals and to the different situations. The experienced scuba diver will certainly be already aware of it. To tell the truth one of the most interesting aspects of my dives is really the interaction that is established with the sea world and particularly with fishes, so much that I am able to experience an exchange of emotions and feelings. For this reason, I have devoted myself to portraits in

underwater photo for a long time, in order to photograph these moments so full of emotion and at times unrepeatable.

But what do we mean by portrait in the photo? For a long time the portrait has been one of the most important and diffused photographic types. With such a term we generally mean the close-up shooting of a subject isolating it from the background in order to give it more prominence.

This is the reason why photographers make use of a reduced depth of field (the focusing zone in the image) and therefore F Stop with elevated numbers (F22-F32) to stop the time and to isolate the subject “in a pose”, leaving a more or less out-of-focus background at his shoulders.

***Turtle. Fuji S2 Pro, DX-S2PRO
Sea&Sea housing, 2 YS-90DX
flashguns, 80 mm AF-Micro Nikkor
F/2.8 D lens
1/100th @ F 8
ISO: 200, Autofocus***

***Moray eel. Fuji S2 Pro, DX-S2PRO
Sea&Sea housing, 2 YS-90DX
flashguns, 60 mm AF-Micro Nikkor
F/2.8 D lens
1/200th @ F 22
ISO: 200, Manual focus***





Fuji S2 Pro, DX-S2PRO Sea&Sea housing, 2 YS-90DX flashguns, 60 mm AF-Micro Nikkor F/2.8 D lens. 1/125th @ F 22. ISO: 200, Manual focus

Also in the photosub we use a similar technique but with some differences: managing the depth of field with a very closed diaphragm and with little brightness, as it often happens underwater, is something of a problem and we will inevitably need at least of a good flash in the reflex photography. With a compact digital camera we will be forced to use the small built-in flash (better if supported by a good flash or external light box). Moreover, the poses

of our subjects, even though spontaneous, will always have to be taken very quickly and often there won't be much time for the shot.

But what equipment shall we use for our sea portraits?

Compact digital cameras

An underwater portrait with a compact camera is surely possible, it is rather one of the best shots: the objectives of these cameras



Nikon D200, DX-D200 Sea&Sea housing, 2 YS-90Auto flashguns, TTL converter II, 60 mm AF-Micro Nikkor F/2.8 D lens. 1/100th @ F 8. ISO: 200, Autofocus

are already ready for this type of frame and they usually have lenses with an angle of view similar to that of the human eye (a frame similar to the human frame). However you must get as near as possible. The camera flash is not very powerful and if we photograph from too far (more than 1,5-2 mt) we risk to lose the colors of our subject. The built-in flash is for shots at a distance non superior to the 4-5 meters, of course on the dry land. In a dive, because of the

absorption of the light by the water, our flash will be even less powerful.

Therefore, to try to take some beautiful portraits you must: 1) draw as near as possible to the animal 2) Frame the subject well, also by using possibly the zoom (without however exaggerating) 3) Remember always to use the flash forcing the shot with the special function of the camera (through menu or special button) 4) If possible use an external flash positioned

aside (angle at 45°) to work better with the shades and to avoid to get a flattened image 5) Have a good management of the delay at the shot of our compact camera; almost all compact digital cameras, before effecting the real shot, send forth some brief pre-flashes to focus the subject and to effect the exposure; not considering that often means to take the photo when the fish has already gone away or moved, irremediably ruining our composition.

Digital SLR cameras

With my Nikon cameras I make use of different lenses and I join them with Dome port planes, the classical Flat Port, and with Ports such as the Super Fish Eye or the Compact Dome Port.

The objective I use more often is surely the Nikkor AF-Micro 60 mms F2.8 D. It's a lens for macro photo but its typology allows fantastic portraits. The 60 mm is famous among the fans of Nikon (Nikonists) and it is considered an exceptional lens both for its neatness and for its constructive quality.



Nikon D200, DX-D200 Sea&Sea housing, YS-90Auto flashgun, TTL converter II, 60 mm AF-Micro Nikkor F/2.8 D lens. 1/160th @ F 18. ISO: 200, Autofocus

For my portraits I often use the TTL. Often I work also in manual and I manage all the technical variables, from the exposure to the focusing to get the desired results.

The portrait is a true challenge, especially with the most bashful and timorous fishes; you draw near and the fish turns around hiding its face, or in a while it gets into some hole. For this a perfect buoyancy is needed, slowness in the movements and all the slyness typical of the photographic hunting. With some training and good will success is insured both when using a compact camera and an expensive reflex camera.

I suggest, at least at the beginning, to photograph little timorous subjects, the fishes that will let you approach more easily, allowing you to manage better the functions of your camera; for this, at least at the beginning, automatism, exposure and automatic focusing are recommended. As you make



Nikon D200, DX-D200 Sea&Sea housing, YS-90Auto flashgun, TTL converter II, 60 mm AF-Micro Nikkor F/2.8 D lens. 1/125th @ F 20. ISO: 200, Autofocus

progress, you will begin to feel the necessity to work in manual and you will demand more to your underwater equipment.

Another objective that I enjoy using for the portrait of the smallest animals is the Nikkor AF-Micro 105 F2,8 D. This objective is more powerful than the 60 mm; used on the digital reflex camera... because of the Cropping (the Lcd sensor is smaller than the dimensions of the film for which the Micro 105 had been studied), it becomes very similar to a 180 mm. It's an objective macro from any point of view. I also find it fit to photograph, with the technique of the portrait, all the bashful and timid fishes that will run away when you approach. We will succeed in taking shots similar to those taken with the 60 mm but staying much more distant (the minimum focusing is in fact at 75 cm). I recommend the manual focusing, the focusing motor drive of the 105 is a bit slow and often the

dial of the housing allows very rapid and accurate regulations.

Soon I will try also the new Nikkor 105 VR, a fantastic Macro objective that has a built-in optic stabilizer, soon some tests and a detailed article will be issued.

For bigger subjects (but not only for those) such as sharks, manta rays, etc., I prefer the Nikkor 20 mm F2.8 D. It is not an objective created exclusively for portraits but its focusing at only 25 cm and the ample frame range allows to shoot frames to big oceanic fishes from a really short distance. The only and big difficulty is drawing near, but with particular animals (such as manta rays) it is not often a problem.

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