

A Conversation With... Kurt Amsler

By Alex Mustard

For this instalment in my Conversation With series you find me on the island of El Hierro out in the Atlantic, which before Columbus sailed to the Americas was thought of as the end of the world. It's a suitably dramatic destination to meet one of the undoubted legends of underwater photography, Kurt Amsler.

We are both here as judges for the El Hierro Open Fotosub competition; and it is certainly a highlight of my year to spend the week together. Despite his long and illustrious career, Kurt's enthusiasm and passion for underwater photography and the oceans remains undimmed. He is an inspiring person to be around and I honestly could have filled a whole year of this interview series, from the conversations during the week.

It is impossible to summarise the multitude of highlights in Kurt's career here. Suffice to say that he has shot 1000s of stories for magazines, written many books and photographed high profile advertising campaigns. His competition record is also a full

house. He won the 2nd CMAS World Championship in 1987, he was named Grand Master at the 1987 Brighton Festival that included the prize of a Rolex watch, his book *Maldives* won the best book of underwater photographs at the Antibes Festival in 1994, and he has won awards in just about every other competition, including the BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year. With Kurt's experience of so many years at the top of underwater photography, I was keen to get his perspective on the past, present and future. I also wanted to discuss what photographers today can learn from the past, to improve our images.

Kurt, of course, remains highly active, he still writes for *Diving and People Magazine* and still shoots for his big clients (he is sponsored by Nikon, Rolex and Scubapro/UWATEC). He also runs very popular workshops from his home in the south of France and on liveaboards. He has very active role refining underwater camera gear for Seacam. Seacam deserve a lot of credit to taking such a progressive approach of



Kurt Amsler with a handful of trophies at the CMAS World Championship 1987, which he won.

working with someone who can test their kit extensively in the ocean. It was fascinating to ask about all the refinements and design philosophy that Kurt has helped introduce into their line of housings and strobes.

It is also impossible to talk with Kurt without wanting to discuss the work he has done for marine conservation. He started SOS-Seaturtles back in the 1980s and it is no exaggeration that it has saved millions of turtles. SOS-Seaturtles still has many active causes and if you

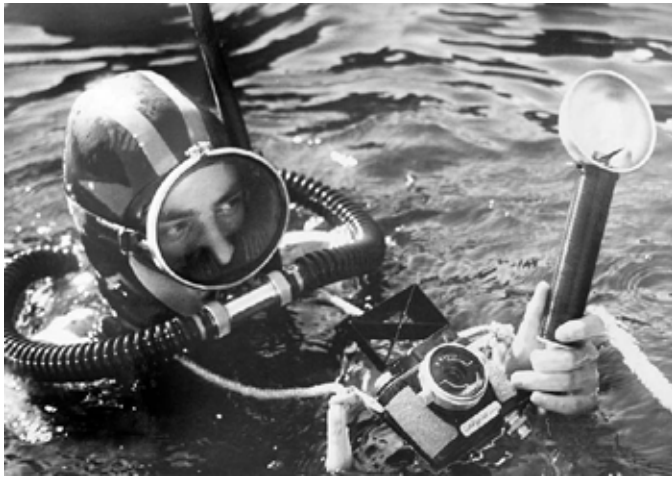


Kurt with his Seacam system, including Seaflash 150 strobes, in El Hierro, 2009. Photo A Mustard.

read this interview, please click on the link at the end and see what you can do to help.

Alex: I'd like to start with a historical perspective. What do you feel have been the big milestones in underwater photography that you have seen?

Kurt: It is best to start at the beginning of the 1960s, because before that it was mainly just a few



Kurt with his CalypsoPhot and flash bulb system in 1963. Photo J Lanvanchy.

divers taking pictures. At that time there weren't many housings – most were using the Hans Hass Rolleimarin, so when the CalypsoPhot came out, it was a milestone. It made it much cheaper than shooting medium format and that really doubled the number of people.

The next milestone was the modular systems of Nikonos and MotorMarine. With one camera you could do six techniques: close-ups, two macros, two wide angles, standard lens. So that was a big innovation. From that moment on people could start taking pictures with just a little money.

Although before that was the arrival of electronic flashes, which was also a milestone. Using flash bulbs was very complicated and expensive. I remember when we were first in the Red Sea in 1964, I had a Rolleimarin and CalypsoPhot with bulbs, so each photo cost you 60 Swiss cents! It made you think. But looking back it



Kurt was inspired to dive and photograph underwater by Hans Hass. In 1984 he worked with Hans Hass (right) making the film The Maldives – Paradise Transformed.

was good training to be very selective. 12 pictures, 12 bulbs for the whole dive.

Alex: A good discipline.

Kurt: And even now, shooting digital, I don't shoot like the others I am still selective. I don't do thirty pictures of one subject. Just because you do more it doesn't mean that they get better, especially if you are not changing anything.

Alex: And the animal is probably getting less relaxed too.

Kurt: My training was to think twice before you bend your finger!

Then, of course, the most recent milestone is digital. Underwater photography has been exploding since then, and it is good, because normal divers have a much bigger horizon now.

Alex: I think it helps those of us who are serious about our photography. Because the more people who have tried it, the more divers there are

who can appreciate what goes into a really top level photo.

Kurt: I agree. If they have tried it, they realise it is not that easy.

Alex: You mentioned discipline as something you brought forward from the early days, what do you think that photographers today can learn from the history? I think that there was a lot of creativity in the work you and others did in the 70s and 80s, which used techniques that have either been forgotten or have dropped out of fashion.

Kurt: What I have realised is that over the past 25 years the creativity has disappeared. In the early days it was black and white photography and you have to deal with light. It was available light only, even with ISO 125 film, pushed to ISO 250 you could make pictures at 70m (230ft). These photographers learned how to read the light.

Nowadays the photographers have one or two strobes and they are in love with them ! They are very high-tech, have a lot of switches and did cost a lot of money.....

Alex: He he he. You are saying that they are so in love with their strobes they don't think of anything else?

Kurt: Yes , they don't think about other light sources anymore, And that reflects in their pictures. They don't care about the sun, they don't know these days if the sun is behind you the water is more blue, if it is in front of you, everything is more diffuse. They just rely on their strobe. And the key to underwater photography is mixing light, ambient and strobe. Mixing it the way you want. This is art. [Underwater] photography can be art, but these days it has become purely technical.

Alex: Which is ironic when you consider how easy the technical side of photography is now, with

the newest cameras.

Kurt: We have not see one photo in this competition where the photographer has used the strobe off the camera.

Alex: I did that! I'll show you. Here is a moray I shot on the first day.

Kurt: Yes, you did it, but not one person in the competition. When I look back to the competitions in the 1980s, that was common, we all had 10 metre strobe cables, with the E/O connector. If there was a cave then there would never be strobes on the camera. We would shoot a black foreground, and then we placed the strobe outside the cave where the model is looking in, to get depth in the picture. And the problem is not just in competitions, in the magazines it is very rare to see something creative.

Alex: I have feeling that part of the problem is that these days it is very easy when you start underwater photography to get a good picture without the basic knowledge. The equipment is so capable.

Kurt: I would say this is 80% of people. The basics of understanding the light underwater aren't necessary to get a photo when you start these days. But that will only take you to a certain level, at that point you need more knowledge. Many photographers reach that level and are unable to progress.

It is like in sport, which always

and still plays a big part of my live. If you decide to become good, you have start by training all your muscles. At the beginning you will not need all of them, but when you reach a certain level you will need them all. If you forget to train the muscles that aren't necessarily important at the medium level, you will never make it to the top.

It is the same thing in photography. It can be strange to hear that semi-professional photographers, who are publishing and winning prizes, they have absolutely no knowledge about the basics. They understand their camera inside and out, but not the light, or the basics of picture composition.

Alex: They are unable to reach their full potential. If a photographer now wants to learn more about light, do you have any suggestions on how to do this? Maybe shoot available light only for a few days?

Kurt: Or taking more landscape pictures in the evenings and mornings [on land]. Or just walking through the forest and look against the sun, through the trees and realise how the light works. If the sun is behind a trunk it is a sunburst.

Alex: I have often thought that the light coming through trees is like being underwater.

Kurt: Yes this is a good example! Just pay attention to the light

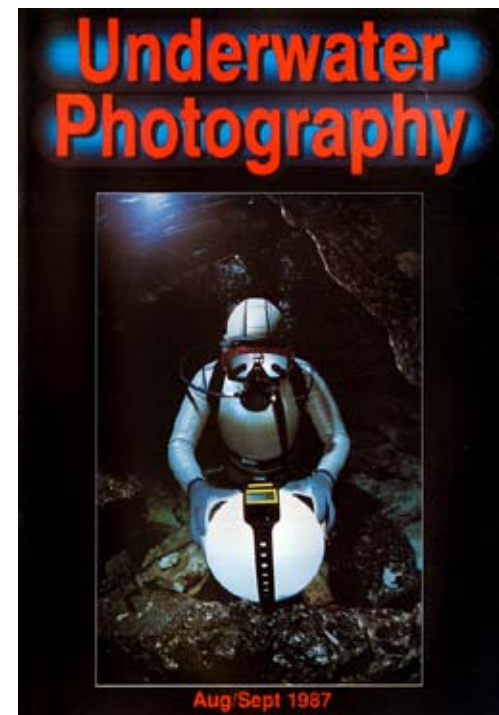
wherever you are. Light is the basic of photography. In 1839, Daguerre and Niépce had to use light and we still use light. Even with digital, without light there is nothing. Once the photographer understands light, their pictures will look different.

Alex: Spend your time studying the light, not the specifications of the latest camera!

Kurt: Ha ha. Exactly.

Alex: I'd like to move on a talk about your work developing underwater cameras because I think it is fascinating. In the past you have worked on, for example the Nikonos RS and the Subal F5 housing, but with you switch to digital, 8 years ago, you have taken that to another level in with your work with Seacam, where you are in charge of helping them in the development of all their equipment. I think a lot of other brands suffer because there is not enough input from real underwater photographers.

Kurt: It is just the same approach as in many other products. For example, in my other love windsurfing, the guys who make the boards don't have to be surfers, they have to be good shapers. The guys who sell the boards, they don't have to surf, they need to understand the market. In these companies everything is divided. So they have test-riders, people who do nothing else but



An advertising image that Kurt shot for UWATEC for their touch activated Aladin computer, featured here on the cover of Peter Rowlands' original, printed Underwater Photography magazine. There is an article inside the issue, where Kurt explains how it was done.

surfing. And they are the ones who will know if a new board really is good or not. If the foot-straps are in the wrong place, they realise it immediately.

It should be the same in underwater photography and that is what Seacam is doing. I know that

the housing manufacturers have a hard time with the current economics. They have to work a lot and they have to do it all by themselves: they do the design, the construction, the marketing and deal with the suppliers, the dealers. There is no time to go diving and test. And anyway they are not able to test because they are not full time photographers and trained enough to dive in all conditions.

Alex: They are too busy making housings.

Kurt: They are engineers. So they must have a test driver. I call myself the test driver for Seacam.

Harald Hordosch is a great engineer and his father as well. Harald understands a lot about cameras and also he is a brilliant photographer, but he is not the guy spending 500 hours a year underwater. He hasn't the time. So Stephen Frink in the States and myself in Europe are his test drivers. We use the housings in all conditions. Under the ice, with gloves, without gloves, deep, shallow, cold water, warm water or under extreme conditions as recently 600m inside caves. Immediately, if there is something not right, we know.

Alex: So what are the important design factors in a housing?

Kurt: The most important thing is not to restrict what is possible with the camera on land. Why do Canon and Nikon spend hundreds of hours giving

their prototypes to people - men, women, children? Refining the design until they have the right balance and everyone can control everything important without taking the eye from the viewfinder. And some housing manufacturers don't understand or don't want to believe it. It is always the moment you take your eye from the viewfinder to change the shutter speed that the fish will open its mouth.

So our philosophy is not to limit any of the possibilities of the camera with the housing. Without taking the eye of the viewfinder, you should be able to adjust everything you can with the camera on land.

Alex: Also when you take your eye away to change something, you push the camera forward to see what you are doing and you push it towards the subject and scare it.

Kurt: The balance is the other crucial factor in Seacam housings, the equilibrium, trim. So many different things have to be put into a housing.

Alex: The other factor I really admire in Seacam is that they listen to photographers and are bringing a lot of innovations, ideas that are coming from what photographers need: external dioptres, the polecam system and the new fisheye/macro domeport....

Kurt: Things that give you more possibilities getting subjects on the pix and makes the life easier. I am



Kurt Amsler "The key to underwater photography is mixing light: ambient and strobe. Mixing it the way you want. This is art." Split level shot with Seacam superdome and D200.

actually a lazy guy.

Alex: Ha ha. No you are not!

Kurt: OK, I am not lazy, but if I can find an easier way I will take it. So I have more time to get a better photo, or to get something else on the dive. I am always looking for the most direct way to Rome, as Julius Caesar was saying: the straight road to Rome! That's how I teach my students too.

Alex: Also I must ask you about the Seacam 150 strobe, especially the Kurt Amsler Edition?

Kurt: I started with flash bulbs, then a land strobe in a housing, then the American Oceanics, the blue ones...

Alex: ...the 2003?

Kurt: Yes. Then in about 1976 or 78, David Doubilet convinced me to try Sea & Sea when I met him in Australia. I used many of their strobes until the YS120 and also the Nikon SB105. The Sea & Sea strobes just always worked. I saw lots of people having problems with other strobes,

especially those manufactured in Germany! And I said to them, why can the Japanese strobes [Sea & Sea and Nikonos] work for twenty years, and yours are always breaking.

Alex: I have had my share of problems, with non-Japanese strobes, mentioning no names!

Kurt: Seacam's first strobes were either housings for land strobes or using the electronics from other underwater strobe manufacturers, and we had lots of these coming back because of these electronics. In the end, Harald said "Enough, we will do our own 100% Seacam strobes".

Alex: So what were the design criteria for the Seacam 150?

Kurt: First it had to be small for its power, for travel and water resistance. Neutrally buoyant and balanced. A 135 degree beam, so that you can light up a fisheye with one strobe if you want to – placing the strobe above and a bit behind the camera.

The 150 is a strobe which can do everything, for both macro and wide angle, so we use a mid-point on colour temperature. Also the battery pack is removable, which also means you can have spares, so you can swap to a full charge and keep shooting, and is also important for security checks at airports. In built LED target lights low for macro and bright for wide. LED's use up much less energy from

the battery.

Alex: You told me the other day that when you were developing them you were even dropping them on purpose!

Kurt: Yes. But I was not playing around, I was simulating what can happen when working with a piece of equipment in the real world.

Alex: On boats, in a hurry anything can happen.

Kurt: In the end, thirty years of my wishes are in these strobes. The customer feedback we have had now, people are very, very happy.

Alex: In the last part of the interview I would to talk about conservation. I think that one of the reasons you are held in such high regard in the underwater photography community is not just your images, but also that you give time to other photographers when you meet them. And perhaps more than that, is the huge amount of environmental work that you have done, particularly because to but it bluntly, you have put your balls on the line to fight for marine life. We all share the sentiments, but not many of us get as actively involved, what drove you to make a difference and fight?

Kurt: My father was a professional sport and action photographer and at the same time a mountaineer; he did lots in the Himalaya and all over. And he was



Extreme underwater photography testing, 600m underground and underwater during the Rolex Awards Exhibition 2008. The human remains that Arturo González and his colleagues excavated in Yucatan's cenotes have shed new light on the early human settlement of the Americas. Photo Kurt Amsler.

shocked by the human impact, even in these remote places. And he started the campaign Keep Our Swiss Mountains Clean. I was a child at the time, but I certainly got inspiration and a respect for nature and animals from that.

Then when I started diving, it was immediately clear to me that what divers were doing at the time was not fair to the marine environment. And also, thanks to photography I have had

and still have a very good life. I don't just want to profit from the underwater world, I want to give something back. I started more than 30 years ago now, with the sea turtles, and after this shark conservation and fighting to free dolphins from captivity.

Many photographers seem to only think about themselves, making money from pictures of sharks and turtles without considering putting something back. And simply, I think



A photographer and grouper on one of Kurt's workshops in the Mediterranean. The groupers are a real conservation success story, a rare sight 20 years ago, many dives sites now are home to more than 20 of these beautiful fish.

this is wrong, not to say pure egoism.

Alex: So with the turtles, how did it start?

Kurt: At the start it was one third of my earnings funding the project. In those days I didn't have sponsors, now we have Nikon, Seacam, Tour Operators, Scubapro and many others supporting it. But in the beginning I just printed the brochures, went to Hurghada and distributed them. I talked to responsible people and got them to stop the turtle business in Hurghada. Before that in the 1980s the shops there were full of turtle shells.

Alex: But fighting for the rights of animals doesn't always win you friends. I think some photographers can be afraid to stick their head above the parapet.

Kurt: Of course, not everyone likes me. I have had threats on my

life in certain parts of the world, but I was in the special forces in the Swiss army, I know how to defend myself! Ha ha ha.

Alex: Ha ha ha.

Kurt: Also some photographers don't like me because I've said to them "you're a great photographer, you've made good money from your pictures, but I never see your name associated with protecting the marine life, working with a conservation organisation".

Well-known photographers should use their popularity, their voice to get these messages out to the diving community and the public. It is wrong just to show the beauty of the oceans, otherwise people leave lectures thinking "Why should I give money to GreenPeace or Sea Shepard. Everything is OK in the ocean, the dolphins are smiling, the coral is

growing..."

Alex: So photographers should be shooting more than just the beauty shots.

Kurt: They should be photojournalists, showing both sides, make people care with beautiful pictures and then bring in the other side, the shadow-side of the story. Many photographers do this already, but more should.

Alex: Finally then, given your long experience in the oceans, you must have seen a lot of these changes first hand. But I know already this week, we have talked about some positive stories, which show good conservation projects really work.

Kurt: At the end of the 70s, beginning of the 80s, the ocean was just a big garbage place and thanks to all the films and pictures, by Hass, by Cousteau, by everyone. The public began to care and things changed. When I first started talking about sharks being in danger from fishing, people thought I was crazy. Now people know the truth. It has changed a lot.

Marine parks can make a big difference. Near my home on the south coast of France, 25 years ago it was very hard to find a grouper. The big ones were hidden, the small ones were not there anymore. Then they ban grouper fishing and introduced marine parks and for the last 15 years,

each year there are more groupers. Now there are lots of dive sites with 20 or 30 groupers.

Alex: If you give nature a chance, take our foot of its neck, recovery can really happen. That is why it is so important to get involved in conservation projects, they do work, they can make a massive difference.

Kurt: It is important to remember it is never too late. Saying it is too late or that I am just one person are excuses.

Alex: We are the ones who go underwater and see these things – this is not a problem that someone is going to solve. We have to get the message out, because we are seeing it with our own eyes. If you are an underwater photographer you have tell these stories.

Kurt: But you have to do it. You.

Alex: I think that is a good message to finish on. Thank you very much Kurt.

Alex Mustard
www.amustard.com

SOS Seaturtles
www.sos-seaturtles.ch

Kurt Amsler
www.photosub.com

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