

Working the subject

by Michael Gallagher

As I've strived to improve my underwater photography over the past few years, I've come to realise just how important two things are - firstly, good subject selection, and then secondly, what you do with that special subject once you find it. I have enjoyed a good number of dives with camera in hand, marvelling at all manner of wonderful marine creatures without taking a single shot, often to the bemusement of other photographers who return to the boat having bagged a shot of most things they saw on the dive.

My philosophy behind this is simple - whenever I see anything underwater, I make an immediate assessment of whether I can take a good photograph of it or not. This depends on a number of things including the subject's distance away from me, its position on the reef, its general demeanour, what lens/strobe combination I've selected for that particular dive, and other different factors.

If I decide that I can't take a good photograph of something, I'll just enjoy looking at it and admiring it for what it is. I forget the camera in my hand and simply enjoy being a diver again. If I decide though that I have a chance of taking some good photographs, then something switches inside my head and the underwater photographer in me swings into action.

Which brings me nicely to the purpose of this short article - to describe the process I go



Cuttlefish 1

through once I've identified a subject with good photographic potential. To illustrate, I'm going to use the example of an encounter I had with a juvenile giant Australian cuttlefish on a dive I did at Julian Rocks, Byron Bay, about 800 kilometres north of Sydney on the east coast of Australia during the Sundive Photo Shoot-Out back in May 2010 (great fun - but that's another story).

I was thrilled when I first spotted this particular creature, as I'd never seen a juvenile version of this truly magnificent cuttlefish species before. The first shot I took ("Cuttlefish 1") was really just an ID shot with some real aesthetic problems in my view, created largely by the downwards angle at which I took the shot. I stayed calm though and to my delight the cuttlefish began to exhibit some signs of curiosity towards me. It allowed me to get much closer and down at eye level with it, as you can see in the much improved second shot I took ("Cuttlefish 2").

By this stage the underwater photographer in me had well and truly taken over. As I remained



Cuttlefish 2



Cuttlefish 3

calm, gentle and patient, the cuttlefish gained sufficient confidence to leave the protection of the reef and approach my camera in mid water, thus allowing me an eye level, full frontal shot with a black background ("Cuttlefish 3").

Now I could even get below the cuttlefish to shoot upwards at it, framing it slightly off centre



Cuttlefish 4

(“Cuttlefish 4”).

Next I flipped the orientation of my camera from landscape to portrait, and came in really close for an intimate head shot (“Cuttlefish 5”). By now the cuttlefish appeared to be totally relaxed, happy and confident, so I started to really experiment, turning one strobe off and pushing the other way out wide as far as it would go, at the same time pointing it inwards toward the cuttlefish. A quick check of my camera’s LCD screen delighted me - I knew instantly that the resulting shot was going to be my favourite one of the whole series (“Cuttlefish 6”).

All wild creatures have their limits though and it was at this stage that the cuttlefish started to display some unusually vivid and striking colour patterns (“Cuttlefish 7”).

I’m not a cuttlefish expert so I couldn’t interpret the message in the patterns, but at the same time I observed some body language which suggested to me that the cuttlefish had perhaps reached the end of its tolerance threshold. I promptly stopped photographing and backed away,



Cuttlefish 5

at which time the cuttlefish slowly retreated to the shelter of the reef. This beautiful creature had gifted me a fantastic experience and some very satisfying photographs, but in my opinion it is our responsibility as underwater photographers to know when to stop and move on.

I’ve heard it said a number of times now that if you are serious about underwater photography, you must choose to be a photographer who dives



Cuttlefish 6



Cuttlefish 7

All the underwater photographs were taken with a Canon 50D with a 60mm macro lens attached, in a Hugyfot housing with dual Ikelite DS-125 strobes and a single focus light.



And by the way, if you're ever lucky enough to find yourself in Byron Bay with time on your hands, there's plenty to enjoy above the surface too, such as surfing dolphins and the iconic Byron Bay lighthouse.

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rather than a diver who photographs. I disagree entirely. I say enjoy your diving above everything else, and forget the camera in your hand until you find something with genuine potential for good photographs.

Once you've identified your subject, be creative and bold, and experiment with different techniques and ideas, but always treat your subject with consideration and respect. If you don't, Poseidon might not show you favour next time you're in his kingdom!



www.underwaterphotography.com/photo-contest/default.aspx?MID=30354

