

Environmentally friendly underwater photography

by Alexander Mustard



As I write this I am on a plane heading across the Atlantic to warmer climes. And I am green with envy. The reason is that I have just put down the latest issue of Ocean Realm with a portfolio of their best images from the last sixteen years. I would love to have shots of that quality in my portfolio. I would do anything! But is this a good attitude? From an environmental standpoint, how far should I go to get a shot?

Underwater photographers have a pretty environmentally unfriendly reputation in the diving world when it comes to looking after the marine environment. Ask any diver and I am sure they will have stories of the photographer on their recent dive trip who smashed

corals and terrorized the fish. We all know it is perfectly possible to take wonderful underwater pictures without harming the environment (the Ocean Realm shots are great examples), but our bad reputation is beginning to stick. A recent paper in the scientific journal Biological Conservation suggested that the reefs of the country I am flying to, would be better protected by “banning access to users thought to do the most damage - novices and photographers”. One of the authors of this paper works for the Department of the Environment, so it is not far fetched to suggest that such recommendations could become law. Unless we do something we could be banned from our favourite reefs in years to come.

Moving subjects.

The black coral crab lives, as it names suggests, in black coral. However this one has been moved and photographed on a brown sponge. Is this acceptable? Nikon F100 + 105mm lens. 2 x YS120. f16 @ 1/250th. Velvia 50.

What I hope to achieve with this article is to raise awareness of this issue, that most of the time we would rather ignore. I do not intend to lay down the law; regulations are of little use if there is no way and nobody to enforce them. What I hope is that we all consider, that bit more frequently, what is acceptable behaviour. Our most effective policemen are ourselves. Who else



Fish feeding.

Fish feeding would go on without photographers, but should we take photos on fish feeds and bait animals for photography?

Nikonos V + 15mm. 1 x YS120. f6.7 @ 1/60th. Fuji Sensia 100.

is with us on every dive?

My opinion is that this problem is two fold. First, as a group, photographers do damage the environment. We can't deny it, all divers do from time to time. And while I know many photographers who always put the environment first, our collective reputation has come from somewhere. Second, I also believe that there is a problem with perception: the diving world tends to tar all photographers with the same brush. Sometimes getting a camera out on a dive-boat elicits the dirty looks that you might expect if you were about to take a pet crown of thorns starfish down with you!

Physical damage to the environment, such as breaking and killing marine life, is inexcusable. In almost all cases no one sets out to damage the reef, but from time to time our desire to get the shot exceeds our diving ability. I am not just talking about a relatively new diver, who has not yet mastered the finer points of buoyancy control, this is just as true for the seasoned



Animal arrangements. This unique "discovery" was pointed out to me on one dive. Unusual behaviour or underwater gardening?

Nikon F100 + 28-70mm lens, +2 dioptre, flat port. 2 x YS120. f11 @ 1/250th. Elitechrome 100 Extracolour.

Legless.

This Dendronephthya or candy crab has lost a leg. Is this natural or the result of too much persuasion by photographers and other divers keen to see it? It is a cryptic animal relying on camouflage for defence - if it is found it is eaten and would be unlikely to lose a leg to a predator. Nikon F100 + 105mm lens, +2 dioptre. 2 x YS120. f16 @ 1/250th. Velvia 50.

photographer pushing to get that much closer or rushing in to capture that elusive creature. The best solution is to make thinking about the environment part of our decision making process both before going in to take the shot and while shooting. So as well as considering the exposure and composition of a shot, we should check that we are doing damage with our flash arms, contents gauges, fin tips etc, and leave well alone subjects that are showing signs of stress. And when we do digress, we need to hold up our hands and admit it. Letting the other divers on the boat know that we weren't damaging the reef intentionally is important. If we say nothing divers will conclude we do that on every dive.

A greyer area comes in subject manipulation, which includes baiting and feeding subjects, enticing and corralling animals and environmental rearrangement. To some extent views on these subjects will always remain personal. There are an increasing number of codes out there that not only provide very useful sets of guidelines, but also help to address the perception that photographers don't care. In the UK the British Society of Underwater Photographers are working with the Marine Conservation Society to draw up a code of conduct.

The Environmentally Aware Photographic Image Competition promotes UWP that is non-stressful for marine life, and states that it will exclude images with divers damaging the reef or with animals being fed, showing signs of stress, in unnatural locations or being touched. This must be the way forward.

To add to the problem, it seems that these days we don't even have to do the dirty work ourselves. On a trip to South East Asia, I found dive guides so eager to please that they would move animals around for me. On occasion I would come round a corner of the reef to find all sorts of strange animal configurations; at times coral gardens were rearranged to such an extent I thought I was diving with the BBC's Groundforce. The behaviour of our guides is completely our responsibility; it is the client who must define what is acceptable.

Finally, I think that it is important to get some good PR! Definitely part of the problem is a lack of understanding on the part of divers of what photographers are up to. Taking time to add a sentence to an article, a talk or an after dive chat in the bar will provide the facts to correct misconceptions. There are



bad feelings out there, which as photographers, often travelling with other photographers, we are not always exposed to.

I would like to conclude by adding some perspective. Of course, underwater photography is not all bad. Most of the time great pictures are taken without harming anything and underwater images have given the population at large a better understanding of why the marine environment should be conserved. The benefit of pictures as posters for conservation is incalculable. Coral reefs are not about to be wiped out by the actions of underwater photographers (although there are plenty of other threats lining up to do the job). That said, as the documenters of this fascinating and beautiful realm we should be doing and be seen to be doing our utmost to conserve it.

Further reading

Bonaire Marine Park photography guidelines

<http://www.bmp.org/html/>

[underwater_photography___video.html](#)

EPIC Photography Competition

<http://www.epicphotocontest.org/>

[rules_regulations.htm](#)

BSoUP and MCS Code

<http://www.bsoup.org/code.html>

Alexander Mustard

HMS Royal Oak video



“a workmanlike, professional
production, and worth viewing”

John Bantin, Diver magazine

The wreck of HMS Royal Oak in Scapa Flow is a designated war grave and all diving is prohibited but in 2000 a special permission was granted for the wreck to be filmed as a moving tribute to all those who lost their lives.

This new professionally produced 50 minute video includes underwater images of the wreck which have never been seen before and there are interviews with survivors and Orcadian Sandy Robertson who was the first diver to go on the wreck the day after she sank. Also included is coverage of another unique event when the ashes of Dorothy Golding, wife of Bandsman Arthur Golding, who went down with the ship, were taken down by her grandson, Christopher Kilford, and placed in the wreck to reunite the couple.

The finale is the unfurling of a battle ensign on the upturned hull by a Royal Navy diver on the anniversary of her sinking and the final credits include the names of all those who died in the tragedy.

Running time 50 minutes. Narrated by Tom Fleming. Produced by Ocean Optics Ltd. Directed by Peter Rowlands

The video costs £16.95 (+£2.50 UK postage). Total £19.45. Please send cheques payable to Peter Rowlands and send them to: Royal Oak Video, 13 Langley Avenue, Surbiton, Surrey KT6 6QN. Credit card tel & fax 020 8399 5709

<http://www.hmsroyaloak.co.uk>

I ordered the video and it arrived last Monday. I've only had a chance to view it today. I was so profoundly moved (and I am a hard bitten first world war historian) that I had to email you. I was impressed with virtually all aspects. I thought the balance between interviewees, diving footage and historical context was spot on. This is something not always achieved in documentaries - I know because I used to make them. The interviews with the survivors threw the whole affair into stark relief. I cannot praise this video highly enough. And I thank you for your web site.

**Warm regards
Pamela Armstrong
12/1/02**