

Uw photography in the Amazon

by Oliver Lucanus

My fascination with fish eventually became curiosity to find out where the fish come from. Unlike marine fishes the information on freshwater fishes is limited to water analysis data, some information about the habitat, but precious little about the actual behaviour of the fish below the surface.

Frequent trips to the Amazon made a new fascination possible: to photograph the fish in their natural environment. Before the age of digital camera this was a true hit and miss project, with Nikonos cameras in murky water with low visibility, lots of particulate matter in the water, and bad quality of light sensitive films. With the arrival of digital cameras many things became possible, because the 1200 ASA files from most cameras produce images good enough for the Amazon's low light situations.

Photographing with available light is most interesting, because it is the only way to show the actual lighting under the surface, and it also avoids the particles getting lit by the flash. Much of the best photo

opportunities are in shallow water, and taken with a snorkel. Diving with SCUBA is not always a good solution and can be dangerous due to trees and current in many of the habitats.

The Amazon has three basic types of water: White water, which is silt laden and usually has a visibility of less than 20cm. Black water, stained by high amounts of tannins. This dark tea coloured water represents a challenge to photograph, because it is so dark. The usual rule for underwater photography applies here: get as close to the subject as possible. And finally clear water: habitats with clear water are rare in the Amazon and usually found

***Rapids in the headwater of the Rio Xingu, a typical clearwater river
Canon 1Ds III, ISO 200, EF 24mm,
F6.3, 1/640***

***The stream from the feeder spring in a
small tributary of the Rio Xingu, Brazil
Aquatica Housing, Canon 1Ds III, ISO
400, EF 14mm, F18, 1/20***





Female Cichla pleiozona (peacock bass) guarding her nest, Northern Bolivia
Aquatica Housing, Canon 1Ds III, ISO 400, EF 24mm, F4.5, 1/320



Feeder spring in a small tributary of the Rio Xingu, Brazil
Aquatica Housing, Canon 1Ds III, ISO 400, EF 14mm, F5, 1/125

where springs form small lakes or streams at the headwaters of the major rivers. The downside of this is that the black water and clear water habitats are often less diverse.

One great advantage of tropical freshwater habitat is the incredibly localized diversity. Isolation drives the speciation of all living things, and small freshwater fish often have very limited ranges of distribution. So any small habitat has the potential for new, endemic species, and dozens of cryptic, nocturnal catfishes and electric fishes.

The strong currents are the greatest danger in the Amazon, as are insect and water borne disease. The fish and other animals pose little threat to the diver/snorkeler. The much hyped piranhas are in general harmless fish that will not usually bite a person in the water. Even during a feeding frenzy the fish will swim within inches of

the photographers hands and not bite. The most feared fish in the Amazon are freshwater stingrays. The poison on the spine of the rays can cause terrible wounds that will take years to heal. Local fishermen will usually cut the tails of stingrays before removing them from their nets. Wading in Amazonian water can be more dangerous than swimming because the stingrays often spend the day buried in shallow water near the shore. The other fish that can be of serious concern is the electric eel because the powerful electric shock from this fish can cause a person to lose consciousness and drown.

Photographing in such conditions is hard on the gear. Nothing remains clean, and sand, and dirt eventually finds its way everywhere. It is best to carry all gear in hard cases, which can be used as tables to work on the cameras in the field, and also

keep insects at bay. Soft bags easily get invaded by ants, (or worse) when they are placed on the forest floor while you are photographing in the water.

Working in shallow or fast flowing water also means elbows and hands are in the substrate, so it is best to wear gloves and some pads on elbows and knees to brace against the bottom while taking photos. Housings must be made of metal, because plastic easily get scratched or damaged knocking against rocks and wood. I dislike the use of strobes because it takes away the beauty of the natural light, with modern digital cameras and mostly shallow working depths there is rarely a need to use artificial light.

The greatest problem with photographing in the Amazon is to find the clear water habitats and be there at the right time of the year. For most places the dry season (our fall, early winter) is the best



Piranha (Pygocentrus cariba) feeding frenzy in the flooded Llanos region, Venezuela

Aquatica Housing, Canon 1Ds III, ISO 400, EF 20mm, F5.6, 1/125

Potamotrygon leopoldi (white spotted stingray) in the shallows of the rapids

Aquatica Housing, Canon 7D, Ef14mm, ISO 400, -0.33ev F & 1 1/250

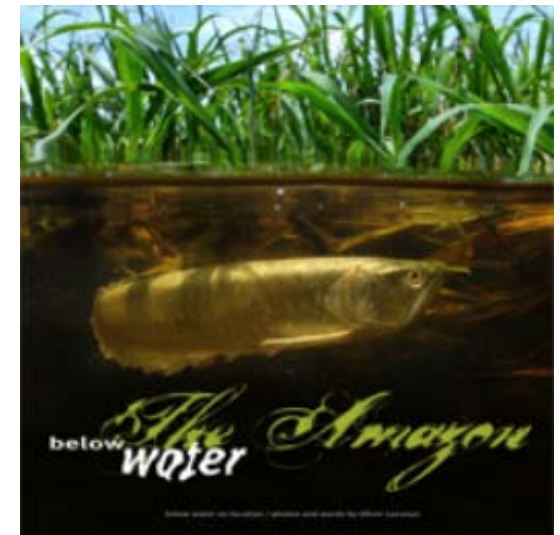
time of the year. But a lot of this is hit and miss and scouting many locations to find a place ideal for photography. Of course no tour company is offering specialized photo tours for underwater photographers. There is however one national park that is ideally suited, safe, comfortable and cheap to visit. The region is called Mato Grosso do Sul and is located near the town of

Bonito, in SouthWestern Brazil. A series of springs forms several crystal clear rivers that flow into the Rio Formoso. The rivers are all with 30 minutes of the well organized tourist town with plenty of things to do and safe snorkeling (and diving) in the local rivers.

Oliver Lucanus



To see more photos and video from the Amazon have a look at my book's website:



www.amazon-below-water.com

www.uwpmag.com

Don't settle for 2nd best



Film - No Filter
No White Balance



Digital - No Filter
Manual WB



Magic Filter
Manual WB

Digital cameras have opened up new possibilities to underwater photographers. For available light photography manual white balance is an invaluable tool for restoring colours. But when you use it without a filter you are not making the most of the technique. You're doing all the hard work without reaping the full rewards.

These three photos are all taken of the same wreck in the Red Sea. The left hand image was taken on slide film, which rendered the scene completely blue. The middle image is taken with a digital SLR without a filter, using manual white balance. The white balance has brought out some of the colour of the wreck, but it has also sucked all the blue out of the water behind the wreck, making it almost grey. The right hand image is taken with the same digital camera and lens, but this time using an original Magic Filter. The filter attenuates blue light meaning that the colours of the wreck are brought out and it stands out from the background water, which is recorded as an accurate blue.

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