

Towards a Fellowship

by Anne Owen FRPS

Most of us who take underwater photographs go through a phase of wanting to show our pictures to other people and be assured that we are taking 'good' pictures. We show them to our friends, we go in for competitions, we try to get them published.....and some of us go for Royal Photographic Society 'Distinctions'.

Someone once asked me why I went to the RPS for 'affirmation' of my ability as a photographer, when 'surely, they can't understand underwater photography'. Well, OK, taking pictures underwater is hard and there are special considerations to deal with like back-scatter, absorption of reds and the need to get very close to subjects. But many other advanced nature photography techniques are hard too - birds in flight or pitcher plants suspended high above the ground in low light below the rain forest canopy. The basics for good images though are the same - good lighting, good composition and the photographer's 'eye' for an interesting subject - the 'wow'-factor. I felt that pitching myself against the broad spectrum of Nature photographers would be a real challenge.

Like most underwater photographers I chose to submit work in the Nature category. Nature photography is considered to be primarily record photography, which means to say that the subject is rendered in a life-like way, in its natural environment. The trick, as with anything else in life, is to know when it will be OK to break the 'rules'.

How did I get started? I first submitted a panel of 15 slides for assessment for the Associateship (ARPS) back in 1998 and having been successful, I almost immediately set my sights on the next level - Fellowship.

Since the comments about my Associateship Panel had been very encouraging, my first effort was to add 5 slides, to come up with a 20-image submission, which I took along to an Advisory Day. There, a group of experienced Assessors look at your work and spend 10 or 15 minutes discussing each individual image, as well as the Panel as a whole. This was a sobering experience. Two things became clear. Firstly, the technical standard required of each image was higher than at Associateship. Tiny flaws that had been tolerated at



Emperor Shrimp on Spanish Dancer, PNG.

Cropping in very tightly has removed un-interesting background and enhanced the details of the remarkable camouflage of the shrimp. Traditionally, you would avoid two subjects, but in this case, it works.





Spine-cheek Anemonefish, PNG

Cropping the image to produce a vertical format transforms an ordinary snapshot into a much more powerful image.



the lower standard would definitely not be overlooked this time around. Secondly, that re-using a lot of images between Associateship and Fellowship was not good enough. I was essentially faced with producing 20 brand new top class slides.

Like many amateur underwater photographers, I only get to take photographs for 2 or 3 weeks each year. On some trips, I'm lucky to come back with even a few reasonable images. So producing a whole new Panel of slides felt as though it would take a lifetime.

On the other hand, I had dozens of 'almost-there' slides - the ones where the framing is not quite spot on, or there's an unfortunate bit of back-scatter, or whatever. That led me to think about submitting prints instead of slides. Perhaps in the process, I would be able to do a bit of tidying up, and salvage some of my 'almost-there' slides into decent prints. I had heard that

digital printing was capable of producing high quality images. The only real drawback to the plan was that I had no experience whatever of printing, digital or otherwise and I had never even seen PhotoShop, let alone used it.

Step one was to book into a long-weekend digital imaging workshop. I took along just two slides to work on, and was very focussed about what I wanted to learn, which was the basics of scanning, cropping, colour correction and minor 'editing'. I bought exactly the same equipment as the course leaders had selected - a Minolta Dual Scan and an Epson 1520 Photostylus printer.

Step two was to start looking seriously at my slides. I scanned, cropped and did preliminary editing on over 150 possibles, then did A4 prints that I scrutinised very carefully. I became quite ruthless at eliminating images - focus not

pin sharp, disappointing colours, uneven lighting, boring subjects and so on. This was a largely 'mechanical task'. At the same time, I was trying to form a vision of what the overall Panel would look like.

At Assessment all 20 prints are displayed together, so that you have to consider the overall visual impact. The prints have to relate together in some way. I decided that my 'story' would be the complexity of colour and pattern on the reef. I would keep each individual image very simple and rely on the grouping to paint the picture of the immense richness of a coral reef community.

I honed down my selection to 35 images and worked hard on each, adjusting contrast and tone and removing blemishes. At this point I realised that I was 'too close' and it was becoming harder to make decisions. I started showing my pictures to lots of people ñ friends,



Colonial Anemone, Fiji



This image has benefited from eliminating some distracting out of focus highlights in the black background surrounding the anemone.

underwater photographers and other nature photographers, in fact anyone who would take the time to look. I wanted to find the images that most people liked. This process was incredibly helpful. Some of my personal favourite were eliminated. For some reason although they appealed to me, no-one else was interested. On the other hand, some images that I had almost dismissed, perhaps because they had been easy to take, were very popular.

I was down to 25 images and faced with making a final selection. At this point, I went off for more coaching, on how to mount and present prints. Finally, I printed all 25 images, at full size on good quality paper. I spread them out on the living room floor (easier said than done, as I'd printed 31.5x25 cm images on A3 sheets) and shuffled them round. My aim was to choose the 20 prints that would work best as an overall group.

I set out the prints in two rows of 10 prints and worked outwards from a core group of four macro prints that I felt were especially strong. One the top left hand side I positioned a group of three prints, on the top right I balanced these with another set of 3 prints. The outer ends of the row were anchored with strong verticals. In the bottom row, I placed other groupings that would contrast and complement those at the top. I tried to ensure that from a distance there would be an overall sense of harmony, while each print would stand up to close scrutiny in terms of composition and quality.

This all sounds very 'by the book'. In fact, I

broke lots of 'rules' as I went along. One image shows two fish, bucking the conventional wisdom about having an odd number of subjects. Several images have cropped subjects, against strong guidance to show images of complete animals only. Not all the pictures are in focus from front to back.

I was, of course, delighted to be successful. I look back on the whole process as a very stimulating, though nerve-wracking experience. I learned a great deal. Obviously I had to learn about printing and PhotoShop, but what I learned about composition and attention to detail, has transformed my photography in the water. I now take as many vertical compositions as horizontals. I spend as much time looking at the background as I do at the subject before pressing the shutter ñ if it's not good enough, I will move on. I even think about the use to which I might put an image while I'm taking it!

In April of last year I was invited to join the Assessment Panel for Associateship and Fellowship in Nature. The Panel meets twice a year and it is a pleasure and privilege to view some stunning Nature photography from all over the world. Underwater photography is reasonably well represented, but I'm sure there are many others out there who would enjoy the challenge of working towards a Distinction. If you are interested and would like to know more, please feel free to contact me.

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