

Underwater Photographer of the Year

The story behind a new competition

by Alex Mustard

What? Another underwater photography competition? I am sure that there are some readers that feel our community needs one about as much as it needs another underwater selfie!

But I hope to convince you that this one will be worth it. We've grand aims, we hope to create a contest that underwater photographers really want, one that draws on the past, but very much looks to the future, one which I hope anyone who reads Underwater Photography Magazine would want to be part of. Yes, we've set a modest long-term goal! We want The Underwater Photographer Of The Year to become the most sought after title in underwater photography!

Down the years I have competed in, sometimes won awards in and judged most of the major contests around the world. Some have got the detail right and some shockingly less so. But I have learned plenty from being on both sides of the judges' table and this has shaped the



Underwater Photographer of the Year (UPY). Let me explain.

Our formula is disarmingly simple. We hope that UPY will appeal because we have a judging process you can trust, with judges whose opinions on your work you want, giving out prizes that are really worth having and, most of all, titles you want to win.

UPY came about simply because a group of us want to do something right by our community. There is no single business, publication or brand that proposed this contest, hoping to grab images or credit. Simply we wanted to give great underwater photography as prominent a public



platform as we can and reward and promote the best of the best.

Standards in underwater photography have rocketed in recent years and UPY will allow both established names to reaffirm their reputations in a changing landscape and emerging talent to be recognised. In both cases evaluated objectively, free from the bluff and bluster of social media!

Judging is absolutely crucial to a competition and I only accepted to be part of UPY if we got this right. I have seen it done wrong too much in the past. Experience has shown me that the judging process is much better when all the panel meet face

to face. Online judging can work, but can have serious problems. In broad terms, it can lead to winners that are good and everyone likes, but nobody really loves. More interesting photos don't make the grade because if one judge doesn't "get it", its average score dips and it drops out of contention. When judges come together in a single room, the best images are discussed in much more detail, and pictures that judges feel passionate about are championed and proposed as winners.

It was also fundamental to have a really good panel. I don't believe you need a massive committee to judge a contest. In fact, I have observed that

big panels judge more poorly than small panels. I guess it is a natural reaction, when you know there are lots of other judges that your focus can wander. Too often I see judges not giving the entries and the rules their full attention. This is particularly problematic in online judging. Much better to have fewer judges knowing they have the full responsibility.

The judging panel of UPY 2015 will be Martin Edge, Peter Rowlands and me (Alex Mustard). I have found entrants most happy with the results when contests are judged by experienced and, importantly, active photographers. Especially so when they are names they know and really value their opinions on the photos. I have stood on many juries and the best have always been populated by underwater photographers.

Personally I couldn't be happier with my fellow judges, Martin and Peter are the guys I go to when I want opinions on my work. They don't have the same tastes in images as I do. But their opinions are ones that I listen to intently. I am sure competitors will agree with me in wanting their images to get the seal of approval from such luminaries.

Prizes are another area that many contests don't get right. Too many are dominated by what the community calls boomerang prizes. They seem



good at first glance, but ultimately have so many conditions that they reward the donor far more than the winner. Dive trips can be the classic boomerang prizes when offered without flights, on limited dates and sometimes even with the requirement to pay for buddy or extra nights to claim. The result is that a surprisingly low percentage of the holidays you see in photo contests actually get claimed!

UPY has a very impressive selection of prizes on offer and it is a boomerang free zone! Our holidays come with flights (from the UK) and



all photographic and dive equipment prizes are ready to dive. Which is exactly what you'd expect from some of the best brands in diving: Apeks, Fourth Element, Nauticam and Scuba Travel. We simply wrote to the companies that we would like to win prizes from and we have fantastic collection including travel, photography equipment, wetsuits and regulators.

There are more than 30 prizes in all and each entrant can only win one. So hopefully lots of photographers will be going home happy and since you get to choose your prize (first



UPY Judges (Left) Alex Mustard (Chair), (Centre) Martin Edge and (Above) Peter Rowlands

choice goes to most successful across the categories), the winners should get something they really want.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of UPY is that we are not controlling post processing. That doesn't mean this is a Photoshop contest, indeed we're unlikely to reward "Photoshop creations". We've chosen this route because we feel it most accurately reflects our community. The vast majority of underwater images we see in magazines, books and online are manipulated in Lightroom and Photoshop in traditional terms.



Furthermore, there are a many great competitions that reward the completely as-shot underwater image. The most prestigious of these is probably the Wildlife Photographer of the Year, but there are many more. So we've decided to take the modernist view.

Or perhaps it is not that modern! Post processing has always been a part of photography. Ansel Adams great prints are, of course, heavily post processed in the traditional darkroom, as were all entries early underwater photographs in contests. The late, great Peter Scoones would regularly stress that underwater photography greatly pre-dates slide film and lauding the straight from the camera transparency as a baseline is misguided. His view was simply this was a historical anomaly, simply the opinion of those that started underwater photography in the 70s, 80s and 90s, but not those who started before or since! While I don't agree entirely and personally still dedicatedly enter wildlife style contests, it is fair to say that Scoonesy's spirit flows throughout UPY.

While UPY is forward looking in this respect, it is also a competition with a clear eye on the past



and celebrating its British underwater photography heritage. In 1965, the first Brighton Festival of Underwater Images took place in the UK and for the next 30 years this was arguably the most prestigious contest and also the main meeting places for serious players to get together and talk shop. This was the days before the internet and handy bi-monthly free magazines! UPY is being launched to mark 50 years since the first Brighton Festival and to return a



premier underwater photo contest to the UK.

We're also bringing back titles and awards from the Brighton era and since our bricks and mortar home will be at the London International Dive Show (LIDS) in February, where the winners will be exhibited and the prizes dished out, we hope to create a strong festival vibe. LIDS is already the home of the PhotoZone, with two days of talks on underwater photography. There will

even be a judges' feedback session on the entries after the prize giving, where you can find out what they thought of all your submissions. And if underwater photographers need further encouragement, London's ExCel Centre is simultaneously hosting the Telegraph Outdoor Adventure & Travel Show, with even more photography talks by leading landscape and wildlife pros and you can even buy a combined ticket!

So what about those special awards? For many photographers the prizes will be less important than the chance to call Underwater Photographer of the Year, 2015, which goes to our best of show. For British entrants we also have a British Underwater Photographer of the Year and a Most Promising British Underwater Photographer 2015, which are open to British residents and British nationals living overseas, of which there are many in the world of underwater photography.

We're starting small with just 8 categories. There is a strong UK bias in our first year, but we expect the competition to become more international as it grows. I hope I've convinced you that we're doing things right, and that you will want to be part of the Underwater Photographer of the Year. The closing date is 5th January and the award ceremony is in London on 14th February, 2015.

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I hope to see you there, I am excited to find out who will be Underwater Photographer of the Year, 2015.

Alex Mustard
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