

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## Laguna Beach Resort, Utila, Honduras

*dive with a little bit of luck, patience, or both*

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Dear Fellow Diver:

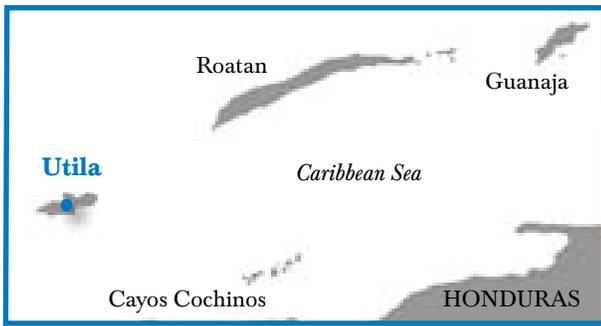
The good things in life don't always come easy, especially when you're searching for big fish on a Caribbean dive. But it can happen, even while diving in Utila, I was surprised to find out when I visited in April. The owner of my local dive shop had warned me beforehand that she had been to Utila five times and had never seen a whale shark. And I had read Undercurrent's mixed reader reviews and Ben Davison's 2003 article in which he rued the tattered coral and limited fish life. So obviously Utila diving can be a crapshoot - - but I got lucky. I had some good dives, many with healthy coral and plentiful reef fish, and even a few whale sharks.

You may chalk it up to luck, but I think my trip turned out well because of an optimistic attitude and my determination to see the best marine life Utila had to offer. Besides, I think neighboring Roatan is too overrun with concrete and cruise ships, so this quiet, seven-mile-long island is a more pleasant alternative. After multiple dive trips to many Caribbean islands, I saw plenty of personal firsts here. Truth is, you can't sit back and hope the critters come to you; you have to seek them out.

Take my 8 a.m. shore dive along the Laguna Beach wall, 100 yards off the resort's beach. I had squeezed out a 72-minute dive using less than 2,000 psi and, with a rising sun, I was treated to the Caribbean commoners: redband parrotfish, yellow goatfish, hogfish, squirrelfish, tangs and schoolmasters. But toward dive's end, approaching the



**A Bungalow at Laguna Beach Resort**



sandy shallows near the dock, a pair of spotted gray-winged little boxcars with snouts and tails flitted past me; prehistoric-looking flying gurnards rooting in the sand. Then a yellowfin mojarra swam by slowly before vanishing into the green shallows. With 900 psi left, I wasn't done yet. After a 45-minute surface interval, I stepped back in and trailed behind my snorkeling spouse. A queen angelfish, rock beauty, butter hamlet, a tube-dwelling secretary blenny, a pop-eyed porcupinefish and giant hermit crabs digging

in the sand kept me entertained.

While the dive staff didn't make much of an effort to show me the best of Utila underwater, local boat captain Wagner "Waggy" Whitefield chased down the big fish. We were headed back to the dock after the last dive of the day when Waggy got word that a whale shark had been spotted nearby. Off we sped to catch the action. At least a half-dozen of the huge fish were there, so all boats on the scene were able to put their snorkelers in the water. Camera in hand and finning as fast as I could, I got up close to one of the most magnificent fish in the sea.

I flew from Atlanta on a non-stop to Roatan, then hopped a puddle-jumper to Utila's little airstrip. The plane was so tiny that the pilot asked one of the five passengers to sit in the co-pilot's empty seat; our bags had to be boated over later that night. A mini-bus met me at the airport and drove me through the narrow, winding streets of Eastern Harbor, the island's only town, then one of Laguna Beach's dive boats took me on a brief ride to the resort. Managers Soledad Segura and Matias Lardizabal, transplants from Argentina, welcomed me at the dock. Over Port Royal beers and mid-afternoon pizza, Soledad gave a resort orientation in broken English. Breakfast started at 7 a.m.; boats left for a two-tank dive at 8. Lunch was 20 minutes after the boat gets back. Then a one-tank dive at 2 p.m., plus a drop-off dive if requested. Dinner at 7 p.m., or an hour later after the two weekly night dives.

The resort accommodates about 40 guests in rustic, air-conditioned Honduran pine bungalows on a sandy peninsula alongside a lagoon. The resort was only half full and incredibly quiet. My cabana had a super-firm king bed, a shelf stretching along the entire back wall, perfect for my camera gear, but only one outlet (US voltage) in the bedroom and a second next to the bathroom sink. I watched sunsets from my small private dock and deck. Plenty of pegs inside and on the porch to hang gear, open shelves for storage, a closet, and an electronically locked safe. The roomy shower stall was clean, with a closing door on the no-paper-waste toilet. Don't drink the tap water; instead, bring back filtered water and ice from the clubhouse. The wood lodge had a circular bar underneath a vaulted ceiling, dining areas on three sides and pool table upstairs in an airy alcove. Wooden paddles hang on the walls, decorated by dive groups visiting Utila over the years. One from ReefNet was decorated with a great barracuda and proclaimed that the team had identified over 300 fish species during their 2002 trip.

The dive shop's own orientation was given by its pleasant young American manager, Angie Sims. Experienced divers are excused from hand-holding. During the first check-out dive off the shop's dock, Angie said with my prior solo-diving experience, I could do drop-off and shore dives on my own. After the boat ride to Big

## Poseidon Recalls Its BCDs

The Swedish manufacturer is recalling 300 of its Besa W50 Diving Wings because the inner bladder can break, posing a drowning hazard. Poseidon says it received 15 reports from divers and dive shops of the bladders breaking, but no injuries have been reported. Henrik Borg, sales manager at the main office, told *Undercurrent* that bladders manufactured from now on will be made out of a new material.

Bladders marked for recall were sold between September 2007 and June 2008, and have the batch number 5445 on a tab located between the "legs" of the inner bladder. Contact Poseidon USA for a free replacement by calling them at 877-673-4366 between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. central, or send an email to [info@poseidoncentral.com](mailto:info@poseidoncentral.com).

Rock, we dropped to the reef 20 feet below. After some check-out drills, Kiwi divemaster Nick Blackwell led the way while Waggy stayed aboard to follow our bubbles. Nick let me linger as far behind as needed for photos, so I put the "patience is a virtue" motto into practice. Soon I had unpredicted sightings, such as a rosy razorfish and a white grouper. A variegated urchin made a silly picture, having hoisted a thick, jaunty cap of debris on top of itself. Secretary blennies, yellowline arrow crab, and flamingo tongue were present on every other dive.

Nick changed tanks for everyone and passed out sweet dessert squares and cookies; each diver had an assigned water cup to fill from a big cooler. Briefings were clear and Nick showed some ribald and juvenile Kiwi humor with his dive signs (e.g., scratching at his crotch to sign "crab"), making up for the lack of a whiteboard or site drawings. It was easy to get the gist anyway. Sites were shallow 30- to 100-foot wall dives with a sandy or grooved ledge on top, and few swim-throughs or caves. Only one dive had any current, so it was easy diving even for the inexperienced.

Yes, the fish population is low. Large schools are rare, reef fish swim as isolated individuals. Overfishing has taken a toll. So I shifted gears to look for life I might otherwise ignore. At Big Rock, I photographed delicate blue bell tunicates and a rare blue-striped lizardfish. As Nick and crew ambled on, I lingered to shoot a fat, red long-snout seahorse. However, soft corals (especially knobby and porous sea rods with feathery polyps extended) and hard coral were healthy and create a charming seascape. Mainly variations of beige, they're not the vibrant neons of South Pacific and Indian Ocean corals, but they're healthy. Bring a 5-mil in the spring -- water temps in April ranged from 82 to a chilly 73 degrees.

The dive center and dock face the lagoon. Drying rooms, showers, and camera and gear rinse tubs were steps away from each other on the wharf. It's only a four-minute walk to here from the most distant bungalow. Crew rinsed and hung regulators and BCDs each evening and set them up every morning. Rinse tanks were refilled then too. Two roomy 36-foot Newtons had dual-entry stern ladders, suncovers, and heads. Each was rated to hold 23 divers, but divers were split up between two boats, so I never dived with more than 10 people, and oftentimes many people skipped dives if the water got too chilly.

In contrast to the top-notch dive operation, so-so maintenance keeps the resort out of the luxury class. Light fixtures along pathways often lacked bulbs, and wiring

## Croc Attacks Diver in Raja Ampat: The Follow-Up

In last month's Flotsam section, we mentioned how a British diver on the Indonesian liveaboard *SMY Ondina* fought off a saltwater crocodile and survived, although with major injuries to his neck and hand that he's still recovering from. Burt Jones and Maurine Shimlock, the underwater photography duo and regular *Undercurrent* bloggers, were in the area when the incident happened and were able to get details from the diver, David Shem-Tov, and *Ondina* owner Ricardo Buxo.

"According to *Ondina* crew, the boat was anchored at Blue Water Mangroves in northwestern Misool when the 15-foot crocodile attacked from the surface and pulled David to the bottom. It was very shallow, so at least depth wasn't an issue. The first bite pulled David's regulator out of his mouth but David, an accomplished diver, had a safe second around his neck and was able to put it in his mouth while fighting back. With his other hand, he used his dive knife to gouge out one of the croc's eyes, and it let him go.

"There was a dentist on board who did some preliminary stitching. The boat called for assistance on its satellite phone and started back to Sorong, the closet city with an airport and medical facilities, but a 15-hour cruise. They were met by a speedboat that transported David to Sorong. After enduring several surgeries in Singapore, mostly on his hand, he returned home to London.

"There was a debate on one divers forum about whether to kill the injured crocodile. Its ability to feed naturally has been compromised, and that may make it more dangerous to divers. However, kill one and another will likely harass divers. The species is protected and no one can really do anything to harm it without special permission. Regardless, most of us who have spent hours in the area, often diving alone, will take more precautions in the future, as should liveaboard divemasters and dinghy crews. The bottom line is we are entering these animals' space. Experiencing the wild is what it's all about, whether we're diving with sharks, mantas or crocodiles."

## Laguna Beach Resort, Utila

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★1/2
Diving ( <i>beginners</i> )	★★★★1/2
Snorkeling ( <i>ditto</i> )	★★★★
Accommodations	★★★
Food	★★★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent

*Caribbean Scale*

hung exposed. Beach trash was not swept up daily. Garbage cans at the outdoor bar could stay half-filled with food and liquor bottles for days. Drawshades in my room were inoperable. The power could go out at any time and there was no backup generator. And bring DEET: like other Bay Islands, Utila is plagued by no-see-ums and mosquitoes on calm days.

Sleepy though it is, Utila is worth an afternoon's exploration. You can go on horseback, trotting the island's seven-mile length. Or take the resort boat to Utila Town, where pedestrians and golf carts mix with small cars packed to the gills with entire families. Smells of grilling chicken wafted through the air at the open market, packed with locals. Another highlight: a

walking tour through the colorfully decorated Jade Seahorse enclave of bungalows, restaurant and open-air bar just off the main drag, where steps and arches are inlaid in rainbow mosaics of tiles, stones and pieces of mirror.

Meals tasted like they were prepared with love by Mom: nothing fancy, but delicious. Each meal featured just one main course, served buffet-style, but it always hit the spot. A typical day had omelets and waffles on the warming trays for breakfast, grilled hotdogs and burgers at the outdoor bar for lunch, tender chicken and rice with coconut milk for dinner. Resort and dive staff mingled with guests, often eating at the bar alongside the rest of us. Kitchen staff smiled ear to ear at us, as we bussed our own dishes.

Besides that first swim with the whale sharks, the surprises continued almost daily. On the morning after, more whale sharks were spotted so I made three more jumps. At the afternoon dive at the aptly named Pretty Bush (lots of tawny soft coral moving like stalks of grain in a wheat field), I saw a bandtail puffer. On the night dive, three wire coral shrimp posed leisurely for my camera. I also came away with shots of rough box, decorator and teardrop crabs, red night shrimp and a large-eye toadfish fully out of its hole. On the way back from a morning dive, Nick spotted what looked like a black garbage bag floating in a shallow bay. My dive buddies shouted, "Manta!" We snorkeled with it to our heart's content. I got some great movies of the huge creature -- eight feet, wing to wing -- doing graceful backward loops over and over.

Of course, I can't guarantee you would have the same sightings I did, and many readers report disappointing diving, but it seems like I timed my trip just right. With a double-helping of whale shark encounters and plenty of macro photo-ops, I had my share of interesting encounters. If you're a diver with an optimistic outlook and the patience to look beyond where those missing schools of fish used to swim, you could come away with a delightful Caribbean dive trip.

-- S.P.



**Diver's Compass:** My seven-night, double-occupancy stay with all meals, airport transfers and a diver/non-diver package came to \$2,600; for surface intervals, there are bicycles, (broken) kayaks, horseback riding, golf carts and four-wheelers, and the resort's boat takes guests to and from town daily . . . Free wireless connection is available in the main lodge . . . Dive gear can be rented, but nothing major purchased . . . There is a daily \$4 reef fee and Honduran exit tax of \$40 per person . . . Direct flights to Roatan run through Houston and Atlanta, but Saturday is the only day

flights arrive and depart Utila; contact Utila Resorts, the hotel's U.S. office, to

book flights by calling 800-668-8452 . . . Honduras is subject to hurricanes from June through November, and the rainy season is October through February . . . U.S. dollars and credit cards accepted . . . AC current is same as in USA . . . Laguna Beach Resort's Web site: [www.utila.com](http://www.utila.com).

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## Caribbean, Hawaii, Indonesia, Red Sea...

### *hidden travel charges, Hawaiian fish, and a good Caribbean site*

**Those Hidden Travel Charges.** While Randy and Carol Thompson (Boynton Beach, FL) had a great time diving with Rich Coast Divers in Costa Rica this May, they got hit for unexpected charges. "You can expect a 5 percent surcharge for using a credit card, and no travelers checks are accepted. Because our credit-card charges an additional 3 percent surcharge for converting charges in foreign currency (common practice for most U.S. credit cards), we asked that the charges be made in dollars. No go. So count on an 8 percent markup on your final tally, unless you want to bring a pile of cash." Good tip, folks, but there are a couple of tricks to try. While businesses are not supposed to add a surcharge for using a credit card (but it's okay to give a cash discount), many do. Sometimes you can get it reversed if you call your card company. Another way to reduce these is to head to the nearest ATM. You'll lose some money in the exchange rates and probably garner a fee for using your card, but you should be able to cut that 8 percent in half. If you've got a \$2,500 hotel and diving bill, you'll save \$100.

**Indigo Divers, St. Vincent.** Though it's got a Cayman namesake, the St. Vincent operation is unrelated. Our readers have been telling us it's a good alternative to Dive St. Vincent and Bill Tewes, if you think you need one. Leslie Fieger (St. George, St. Vincent & Grenadines) has made around 1,000 dives, most at 20 different Caribbean venues. "I was one of Kay Wilson's first customers when she opened up shop in 2004. She runs a first-class operation and goes out of her way to provide an optimum experience for all divers. Her love of diving is plain to see and her enthusiasm infects her customers. Her young enthusiastic team, dive instructor Dale and divemasters Andrew and Luke, shared their pleasure of discovering new sites and wonders with their guests. At Kingstown Wall, Kay found an unexploded WWII ordnance. Because she is such a great photographer, Kay can help other shutterbugs find and frame their own great shots." ([www.indigodive.com](http://www.indigodive.com))

**Not All Americans Avoid the Red Sea.** A reader who just calls herself Stephanie was aboard the Blue o Two's *M/Y Blue Fin* in April and says, "The week was a special reef cleanup trip in association with the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association ([www.hepca.com](http://www.hepca.com)). We performed 21 dives for the week, three of them as reef clean-ups. We collected approximately 600 pounds of trash (clothes, towels, bottles, yogurt cups, oil filters, etc.). The accommodations and food were good; plenty of hot water and beverages.

The *Blue Fin* has a small equipment deck so we had to get ready in two different groups. Crew paid good attention to safety, making sure all divers had buddies and understood how to inflate the safety sausages, provided detailed dive briefings (we had some strong currents that week), and would promptly get the Zodiac to divers. The diving was in the northern Red Sea and it was a good mixture of reef diving and wreck diving. We didn't see many turtles, no sharks or mantas, and a few pods of dolphins. The fish life was abundant, hard/soft corals are plentiful, and small life good - - plenty of blue spotted stingrays, giant moray eels and other eels, wrasses and nudibranches. Thistlegorm is a wonderful dive but most operators from Hurghada and Sharm el-Sheik are damaging it by tying directly onto the wreck! In high season, there are more than 20 dayboats with approximately 20 people each on the sites. All of the bubbles are rusting the wreck quickly. Blue o Two is one of only two operators that don't tie to the wreck, and it supports a permanent mooring system for the Thistlegorm. Without action, the Thistlegorm will not be able to be penetrated in the next few years. Diving in the Red Sea is always a challenge with currents, surges, and waves." ([www.blueotwo.com](http://www.blueotwo.com))

David Reubush (Toano, VA) was aboard the *Emperor Infinity* last September and says, "Diving here is better than the Caribbean but not as good as Indonesia, although it's much easier to get to. You'll also find anywhere from six to eight boats at any of the dive sites. Everybody either anchors to the reef or ties up to another boat. (Note: The marine nonprofit Seacology is helping to fund the installation of mooring buoys at a number of spots.) There is so much Zodiac traffic that the standard procedure is to send up either your or your buddy's safety sausage while doing your hang at 15 feet so nobody runs over you. One divemaster said two people had been killed at Sharm el-Sheikh last September after being run over. On a night dive at Sataya, lots of lionfish had learned to use divers' lights as a hunting aid. I would try to take a picture but my modeling light would attract a bunch of lionfish that would get between me and my subject. Most of the crew were very service-oriented, and the food was really good. The small gear area was oriented transversely across the boat, with wetsuits hung up at both ends, so you had to make your way through them to get to your equipment station. No camera facilities other than a too-small rinse tank and a charging station. The cabins were relatively small with poor storage. The air conditioning kept my cabin and the salon comfortable but if you left your cabin for

## Is That Overseas Dive Destination Safe to Visit?

**Dear Ben:** I'm wondering about the safety of dive sites as it pertains to us Americans politically. Because of all the world tension, I've been staying away from Indonesia, the Red Sea, the Philippines and so on. Am I crazy to be avoiding these places or not? The worst thing I can think of is never going diving in Indonesia because the media said not to, when it really was safe all along.

-- Jim Nelson, Austin, TX

\* \* \* \* \*

Jim, I can't think of a single major dive destination I'd avoid because of the perceived risk. But you can check out how the U.S. State Department views travel risk at its Web site (<http://travel.state.gov>). Its reports are much calmer and more reliable than those from any blog or cable-news network. Frankly, I think too many Americans are irrationally fearful about travel risks and not always knowledgeable about geography. A few years ago, after a nightclub bombing in Bali, divers stayed away from Sulawesi, a separate island hundreds of miles away and reached primarily from Singapore. Adventurous divers reading *Undercurrent* are getting plenty of good diving all over the world. Here's what the State Department is saying now about some dive destinations:

**Honduras:** The State Department issued a travel warning after the June military coup that ousted Honduras' president, recommending Americans "defer all non-essential travel until further notice." However, the Bay Islands are far from the unrest so flights directly to Roatan should be of no concern, but some people change planes in the cities of Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, where there may be potential problems. Me personally? I wouldn't worry.

**Indonesia:** Despite the Jakarta hotel bombings on July 18, State has not issued a travel alert and besides, the capital is a thousand miles away from Bali and dive sites at the eastern end of the country. The most recent notices focused on rising credit-card theft and fraud, and a rash of drink-spiking incidents in Bali nightclubs earlier this year. State does advise travelers to avoid crowds and keep a low profile but so far as dive resorts and liveaboards anywhere in Indonesia, I wouldn't hesitate going.

**Malaysia:** State is still concerned about terrorist cells that may be in the eastern islands and coastal areas in the state of Sabah, near the Philippines. "Exercise caution, remain alert to your surroundings, and use good personal security measures." Sipadan and popular dive destinations in the area are under police guard and filled with divers.

**Mexico:** State issued a February warning about increased crime and violence countrywide, recommending travelers visit only business/tourist areas and then only during daylight hours, and avoid the prostitution and drug-dealing hubs. Personally, I would have no qualms about flying to any of Mexico's popular diving venues, all far from the troubled border towns.

**Papua New Guinea:** The biggest concern is the high crime rate, and many visitors have suffered severe injuries from carjackings and armed robberies, especially in Port Moresby. People traveling alone are at greater risk for robbery or rape. State recommends organized tours booked through travel agencies as the safest way to visit PNG. I'd be on guard in Port Moresby, but would be pleased to dive anywhere in PNG. However, our PNG reviewer in the February issue witnessed a shooting and stayed at a resort where armed robbers had just appeared.

**Philippines:** State warns travelers about the risks in the southern islands of Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago due to bombings by regional terrorist groups. But all the dive operations I want to visit are far from trouble spots, so the Philippines is high on my wish list.

**The Red Sea:** State recommends against travel to the Egypt/Sudan border, although the dive resorts and boats are far up the Egyptian coast in areas not highlighted as security risks. While there were recent terrorist attacks in tourist regions, Americans weren't targeted, and the crime rate is low. Europeans are enjoying all the wonders of the Red Sea and Americans are foolishly missing out.

**Thailand:** Recent government instability means you should avoid crowds and public demonstrations, particularly in Bangkok. There have been cases of single women tourists being robbed and even murdered at night in beach communities. Political and criminal violence are of concern in the far south of Thailand and along its borders with Cambodia and Burma. Regardless, I wouldn't dodge the island of Phuket nor Thailand's liveaboards.

For any overseas dive trip, the State Department recommends you register with the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate in the area through its Travel Registration web site (<https://travelregistration.state.gov>). You'll receive the most recent security/safety updates about the country before and during your trip. Registering also means you can be reached if an emergency happens abroad or back at home.

-- Ben Davison

even five minutes, the a/c man would come along and turn it off. So after most dives you would come back to a hot cabin.” ([www.emperordivers.com](http://www.emperordivers.com))

**Hawaii, the Big Island.** John Woolley (Olympia, WA) was there in June and writes, “Having read a reader report bemoaning the loss of fish in Hawaii’s reefs, I thought I was prepared but I wasn’t. Reefs are the ocean’s nursery, and Hawaiians have murdered their young. I’m told there are no limits on the taking of reef fish, most of which go to the commercial aquarium trade. Whatever the reason, Hawaiians need to wake up to what they are doing. While the manta night dive was absolute magic, it is a manufactured event. The true joy of diving is experiencing the natural underwater world. I’ve now experienced Hawaii’s and it ain’t pretty. To salvage the experience of diving there, try an ‘adventure dive,’ which means actually taking the boat far enough offshore to find some fish. While very expensive (\$205 for three tanks), you at least get some insight into what diving used to be like. Then take your rental car on a day trip to the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. The land trip to the volcano outshined the diving.”

In our July issue, writer Rene Umberger described how up to 75 percent of Hawaii’s endemic fish are being taken by the aquarium trade. Woolley says a good way to stop that is by contacting Hawaii politicians and reminding them that, “Those coming to marvel at the fish in their natural habitat -- snorkelers and scuba divers -- bring more money to Hawaii than those capturing the fish to send them out of the state. Add to this the ecological impacts of depleting fish stocks, and you have a looming ecological -- and economic -- disaster.” Send your comments to Hawaii’s top state senators Colleen Hanabusa ([senhanabusa@capitol.hawaii.gov](mailto:senhanabusa@capitol.hawaii.gov)) and Fred Hemmings ([senhemmings@capitol.hawaii.gov](mailto:senhemmings@capitol.hawaii.gov)), and House of Representatives leaders Calvin Say ([repsay@capitol.hawaii.gov](mailto:repsay@capitol.hawaii.gov)) and Lynn Finnegan ([repfinnegan@capitol.hawaii.gov](mailto:repfinnegan@capitol.hawaii.gov)).

On the same topic, I received an e-mail from a reader in Berkeley, CA, who said, “I was appalled to read how fish collectors are destroying Hawaii’s reef. I didn’t realize the scope of the problem and hadn’t considered how removing herbivorous fish has led to algae covering the coral. People can’t go into the wild and trap birds to cage them in our living rooms, so why in the world should we be free to trap fish so we can display them in our living rooms? We run around trying to preserve the reefs in a bunch of other countries when this insanity is going on right at home. And why does the Coral Reef Alliance, to which I’ve sent money to save the reefs, not oppose this?”

I too am surprised that CORAL, whose membership is composed mainly of divers, is not opposed to fish collection on Hawaii’s reefs. CORAL argues that its role is to bring all interested parties to the bargaining table and work out a solution -- not to fight against any specific activity. Executive Director Brian Huse tells me that in Hawaii’s “very contentious political environment, the stakeholders spend inordinate amounts of time pointing fingers at each other, accusing each in turn of having a greater impact on the reef. What transpires

is effectively a stalemate, with no effective solutions proposed, let alone implemented. Unless and until the warring factions can come together, I fear a solution to fishing will not be found.” Perhaps, but I don’t really buy that. We’re not talking about food fish and besides, for my money, CORAL should be pushing hard to regulate fish collectors and ban much of the practice, not get caught up in process issues to balance interests. If a national citizen’s organization like CORAL isn’t going to stand up to the fish collectors stripping the reefs and force them to bend, who will?

**Hotel Santika Manado, Indonesia.** Bob Ayers (San Jose, CA) stayed at this Sulawesi resort last October and says, “The Santika is a fine, large resort with beautiful grounds, and is an excellent value. The reef was in excellent shape and the small sea life was by far the best I’d seen in quality and quantity.” But he has a real thumbs-down for the dive guides from the on-site dive shop, Thalassa Diving Center. “They routinely disturbed sea creatures, turning anemones over looking for shrimp, stacking cowries (why?), forcing mantis shrimp out of holes, teasing ribbon eels, etc. And they had two harlequin shrimp that they kept in a bottle and ‘let out’ for divers. This must be what their clientele wants...” ([www.santika.com](http://www.santika.com))

**In Depth Watersports, Cayman Brac.** Jonathan Scott (Plainfield, NH) dived with this operation in March and says while they cost more than Reef Divers, you get more. “It’s well worth it for their high-speed boat, willingness to visit requested sites, and do drift dives. Reefs were surprisingly unaffected by Hurricane Paloma. A two-tank trip to Little Cayman’s Bloody Bay showed marked contrast in terms of diver impact versus Cayman Brac’s reefs and walls that had been virtually undived since Paloma hit in November 2008. I particularly enjoyed Tibbetts Wreck as both day and night dives (including a rare sighting of mating slipper lobsters). Lots of great barracuda. Only a couple of nurse sharks and no larger pelagics, despite some diligent looking into the blue. I saw a few turtles and stingrays but no eagle rays. Enjoyed some great snorkeling off the beach at our rental house on the south side, including the shallow-water *Prince Frederick* wreck. Corals and sponges were healthy and thriving. Got up close and personal with ‘Ben and Jerry,’ the resident, semi-tame Nassau groupers at Marilyn’s Cut site in Bloody Bay. Some very fishy sites with great clouds of grunts, parrotfish and angels, and impressive tarpon hanging out where they were supposed to be, on Tarpon Reef. In Depth’s semi-inflatable, high-speed and comfortable powerhouse can go 40 knots, taking only 20 minutes to get to Little Cayman, and to/from any site on the Brac in 20 minutes or less. There is no head but the quickness means requests for trips to onshore facilities are easily accommodated. Captain Craig and his crew regularly visit new locations not accessed by Reef Divers. Divemasters lead a guided tour for those interested but divers may dive their own profiles, and extended bottom times were the norm. Being able to do several dives as drifts was a huge plus. Diving the Brac has never been this good. Go now while you can have the entire place to yourself.” ([www.indepthwatersports.com](http://www.indepthwatersports.com))

**Bad Treatment at Sea Explorer, Philippines.** Helga Cookson (Brussels Belgium) went to the resort for a third visit last December and dived with Sea Explorers next door. “I had a vestibular accident, which gave me severe vertigo and left me vomiting for two hours. The French divemaster, who was not present, ordered 50 minutes of oxygen and sent me the next day to a cardiologist two hours away. After an overnight stay, I returned and the divemaster said he had spoken to an expert in Cebu who said I could dive again to 30 feet, which I didn’t feel up to. Then a few days later, he said he had spoken to two experts and I had to go straight to the recompression chamber in Cebu, five hours away). With no DAN insurance or credit card, I asked whether Sea Explorers could advance the money. They declined because they said it would cost US\$3,500. Luckily, I refused to sign a paper drawn up by the divemaster in bad English that I refused to get hyperbaric treatment that I could not afford! Then I learned from a reliable source that the cost for hyperbaric treatment was only around \$550 only, which I could have paid. I was furious, flew back to Brussels and went straight away to a hyperbaric expert who said I was lucky to have no lingering symptoms.”

**Sunset Waters Resort, Curacao.** As of press time in late July, it was rumored to be shutting down. Bruce Newman (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) had already placed the 50-percent deposit for a December trip when he got an e-mail on July 18 from Lynn Bean, co-owner of the on-site dive shop Sunset Divers. It read, “Due to the financial difficulties of Sunset Waters and

its inability to pay services we’ve provided over the last four months, we have no choice but to close our doors. Today will be our final day of business.” Newman e-mailed Sunset Waters’ U.S.-based manager and received an auto-reply that the man no longer is representing Sunset Waters. Then an inquiry to reservations handler Cory Acosta got this response: “Sunset Waters has not been able to honor last week’s reservations. It is just a matter of time before we may be closing our doors [and] until everything is resolved, we will probably close. Please make other travel arrangements.” “Now we either have to drive to Habitat/Easy Divers, or find another hotel in an area with a dive shop,” says Newman. “I’m trying to cancel the villa and get my money back.” Caradonna Dive Adventures, which offers dive packages to Sunset Waters, has contacted the resort, its owners and the Curacao tourism bureau but had not heard anything as of July 20. “I’m not sure if any customers have made deposits but what happens now will depend on whether the resort went bankrupt or just closed its doors,” says Caradonna’s president Tim Webb. “We will try to recoup deposits and relocate divers to a similar property.” We contacted Sunset Waters’ corporate owner, Urban Research Investment Corp. in Chicago, but they didn’t return phone calls or e-mails.

**Dive Bouteille, Guadeloupe.** Did you know that Martinique is a Caribbean island? Guadeloupe too? Did you know that each has about nine times the population of Grand Cayman? So why do you not hear of anyone diving them? Mainly because English is never spoken, as French and Creole

## Hawaii Protests Shark Tours But Study Says They Do No Harm

Plans for a new “swim with the sharks” tour near Maunalua Bay were canceled in April after irate Oahu residents were up in arms. Iolani Lewis planned to run tours off the *Snoopy V*, chumming the ocean to attract sharks and put clients in cages to watch them eat, but locals said that was too close to waters where they swim, surf and canoe. After speaking to Lewis and the owner of the *Snoopy V*, state representative Gene Ward said they called it off. “With all this community pressure, they decided it was better not to go forward,” Ward told the *Honolulu Advertiser*. “[Constituents have] armed themselves with pitchforks and torches.” After 300 protested at a town hall meeting, the Hawai’i Kai Neighborhood Board approved a resolution calling for a statewide ban on shark-feeding tour operations. Now a council member in Maui, which has no shark tours, is proposing a ban against them ever getting started.

Hawaii has no jurisdiction over shark-feeding tours that operate out of private marinas and go three miles from shore into federal waters, where it’s not illegal to chum for or feed sharks. But Michael Tosatto of the National Marine Fisheries Service in Honolulu said his agency has launched a probe into Oahu’s two current shark tour operators, North Shore

Shark Adventures and Hawaii Shark Encounters. “We are investigating these companies and how they operate, and hope to address the violations that they’re committing,” he told the Associated Press. North Shore Shark Adventures owner Joe Pavsek says he’s doing nothing illegal, that he takes people to waters where crab fishermen have unintentionally been attracting sharks for 40 years by tossing unused bait overboard, and that his tours don’t alter shark behavior.

New research backs him up on that. The Hawaii Institute of Biology issued results from its two-year study of Hawaii’s shark-cage dive tours, stating they’re of little risk to people near the shore. It’s mostly because they’re done miles offshore but also because they attract Galapagos and sandbar sharks, two species rarely involved in attacks on humans. While people have claimed the sharks follow the boats back to shore, the researchers, who used acoustic telemetry to track the movements of sharks tagged during the tours, found they stayed out at sea. Carl Meyer, one of the study’s researchers, told the *Advertiser*, “If these shark tours were a real problem, we would have seen it manifested by now in an increase in attacks.”

are the languages. George Irwin (Bloomington, IL), who has made more than 1000 dives, went out with Dive Bouteille on Guadeloupe in May and tells us, "We went diving twice and were thrilled with the quality of the diving - the corals were in great shape and the fish life was plentiful. Two dives were the Caribbean at its best - LAquarium at La Rendonde and Sec Pate. The latter is in the channel between Guadeloupe and the Saintes, and it has stiff currents but has the best coral and fish I've experienced in 20 years of diving the Caribbean. The couple who runs La Dive Bouteille were excellent and helpful; they speak mostly French but the language barrier was not a major problem. Guadeloupe is a great place and with the excellent diving, it should be on anyone's short list of destinations." (www.dive-bouteille.com)

**Status Report on Lembeh Strait.** In our June e-mail newsletter, we asked divers who recently visited this Indonesian muck-dive site whether fish life was up to expectations. Divers who've been there multiple times report it's noticeably on the decline. Alan Olson (Port Byron, IL) went in May after a trip two years ago and says, "Most fish are juveniles and intermediates; many of the adults were missing. One notable exception was Banggai cardinalfish, which were everywhere." Larry Pollster (Martinsville, IN) visited for his third time in May and was "a little disappointed compared to a trip in 2007. Most of

the typical critters were around, like snake and ribbon eels, scorpionfish, waspfish, stingfish, and devilfish. But I dived eight days and never saw a hairy frogfish; seems they've moved on to less crowded areas." Both men say increased dive traffic could mean more difficulty in finding critters. "It was not uncommon to have two or three boats at the same dive site; that was unheard of just a few years ago," Pollster says. Olson adds, "I was told there are now 10 dive resorts operating in the Straits, with two more under construction, plus dayboats from the larger cities." First-time visitors raved about the diverse marine life they saw but commented on the trash amassing everywhere. "The water is strewn with floating garbage and there are slicks of who knows what on the surface," says Todd Lichtenstein (West Orange, NJ), who visited in late May. "No one seemed to care or be able to do anything about it." However, everyone agreed Lembeh is still one of the best places for critter lovers and macro photographers. "It's the only place in 25 years of diving that my wife wanted to visit more than once," says Rod Challenger (Tierra Verde, FL). "We've been there twice and plan to return. We've never been anywhere else where such unusual marine life exists in such abundance. We always saw something unusual on every dive."

-- Ben Davison

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## Recycling Your Old Dive Equipment

*for divers with worn-out gear, it's not easy being green*

We recently got a letter from reader Suzanne Rose (Natick, MA), asking us how she can "retire" her old, worn-out scuba gear. "Such as the wetsuit that has completely fallen apart. I did once ask a rep at a dive show rep about this. He said I could mail my worn-out wetsuit to the company and that they'd 'take care of it.' He didn't seem sure as to what exactly they would do with it so, worried that they would just throw it away, I never sent it to them. But I don't want to throw it in the trash and have it wind up in a landfill, as I suspect it takes a long time for neoprene to disintegrate."

After interviewing dive shops, gear manufacturers and recycling experts, we concluded there isn't a simple way yet to recycle dive gear. Some types of equipment are easier to recycle than others - - but it's up to the diver to make the effort getting it to the most eco-friendly place.

The best bet for eco-friendly disposal is to first contact the manufacturer - - many are putting together recycling programs for their gear. While some companies will take them back for free, others require you to upgrade to a newer product before they'll recycle. The gear easiest for them to recycle are BCDs, regulators, dive computers and instruments. Mark Lane in Oceanic and Aeris's customer service department says his company has a trade-in program for those products

for customers who upgrade to newer models. The metals used in those products are stripped out, and the company used them in the creation of new gear.

Second, ask your dive shop. Gordon Scott of Universal Scuba Distributors in Houston says his shop has trade-in and resale programs for many types of dive gear. He'll even take tanks made after 1990 because they can be re-certified and put back into use. Still, adds Scott, some stuff will just end up in the trash. Sal Zammitti, owner of Bamboo Reef in the green-pioneering San Francisco, admits he has no choice but to toss rubber masks, fins and wetsuits too worn for resale because there is no place that recycles materials in small quantities.

If your gear still has some life in it, consider re-selling it online at eBay. A recent check of used regulators on the site showed 124 for sale. Or donate it to your local Salvation Army or Goodwill Store, where profits go to job-training efforts and career services. Some don't accept dive gear, so ask beforehand. If your gear doesn't sell, however, it will, depending on the individual store's policy, either go to a recycler or the trash can.

Consider donating your gear to an organization that uses divers, like your local aquarium. Jack Kuhn of Harbor Dive in Sausalito, CA, donates his store's used wetsuits, masks and fins

to the nearby Marine Mammal Center. “Their stuff gets trashed quickly because they’re often diving in surf and near rocks, so they’re always looking for replacements.”

If your dive gear is just too old to be used anymore, how can you know whether it will make the recycling cut? Here’s a cheat sheet:

**Dive computers, regulators and gauges:** After the products are disassembled, the computer batteries, brass, aluminum and other metals are recycled for use in new products. Cynthia Georgeson, spokesperson for Johnson Outdoors, which owns ScubaPro and Uwatec, says the company uses a specialized recycler that can efficiently separate the scrap material for re-use. Lane at Oceanic/Aeris doesn’t know what happens to the rubber in regs and BCDs. “Those are trickier because there’s lots more involved in their disposal and I’m not aware of anyone who recycles them. A lot of our soft stuff is made overseas so it’s not like we can put them back in the manufacturing cycle.”

**Wetsuits:** O’Neill says it has a recycling program in the works but currently does not ask customers to ship old wetsuits back to the company. We also contacted BodyGlove, another major wetsuit maker, but they never responded to us. But we did find Green Guru, a company in Boulder, CO, that will take neoprene wetsuits and turn them into snowboard and surfboard bags ([www.greengurugear.com](http://www.greengurugear.com)). However, you do have to pay the shipping bill. If the worst happens and the wetsuit does end up in the landfill, says Gordon Scott, neoprene does break down over time. “The earth eats it because

it’s filled with nitrogen. If you don’t want to do that, you can recycle it as horse blankets, dog covers, and padding.”

**Tanks:** If your aluminum tank was made after 1990, ask your dive shop if they can take it back (pre-1990 tanks were made of metals with weaker alloys). Steel tanks can be recycled but scrap yards require that you cut them in half before you bring them in or they’ll charge you \$20 or so per tank to take it off your hands.

**Fins and Masks:** Very few recyclers will take just a pair of fins or a wetsuit or two, so these are the most likely to go in the landfill. Glass in masks is usually tempered, unlike that in standard food bottles, making it harder for reuse.

There are a few self-starters trying to get their peers involved. One is Ocean First Divers in Boulder, which prides itself on promoting eco-friendly dive practices. It asks customers to bring in old wetsuits, gives them \$20 off the purchase of a new one, then sends the scrapped wetsuits to GreenGuru. Owner Graham Casden says he has been talking to PADI about wetsuit reclamation nationwide and that the agency has asked him to go to the big DEMA show this October to talk about creating eco-friendly dive shops.

Unless DEMA or the major manufacturers pick up the cause, it’s up to you to make the effort. “The problem is there must be someone who has the energy and financials to do it,” says Scott. “Most manufacturers don’t want to handle this, and they won’t even answer their phones.”

-- Vanessa Richardson

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## A 34-Year Friendship Bonded by Diving

### *solace below the surface at Turneffe Atoll*

Not long ago, I received this email from David Jones of Sheridan, OR:

*I am writing on behalf of my wife, Carol Jones, who was a subscriber and diver. I am sad to report that she died this past December and so will not be renewing. The sea meant much to her and diving allowed her to be close to it in a way that she loved. She greatly valued Undercurrent and I wanted you to know that. (I do some work with an NGO that seeks to protect the oceans—The Marine Conservation Biology Institute—but I am not a diver.) You might enjoy the attached article, which was written by noted author and her diving buddy, Sallie Tisdale. If it helps only a few people think more about the oceans than they do now, it will have served a purpose all of us value.*

\* \* \* \* \*

My dive buddy, Carol, is floating 50 feet under the surface of the sea. We glance at each other every few minutes, keeping track. We have been diving off a little island called Southwest Caye, 35 miles from the coast of southern Belize, for several

days. She and I swim quietly through the warm water, over sandy plains and coral boulders. We see sharks and garden eels and blue parrot fish motoring madly against the current. Carol likes to stand as she might in a museum, hands folded, gazing into the crevices of the coral reef. Right now, I’m hanging upside down, peeking under a ledge.

After several minutes, I look up and see that Carol is making one of her favorite faces: pursed lips, hands on hips in pretend exasperation. She catches my eye and shakes her finger. I get the message: “Pay attention.” She does not mean the fish.

Carol and I have been diving together for six years. She’s a natural, as she is with most physical activities, and a few times a year, we take off for distant shores. But three years ago, in the same week she was elected to be the first woman judge in her rural western Oregon county, Carol was diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer.

We've made four dive trips since then, and on each outing, Carol has more bluntly asked me to watch out for her. For the first time in our long friendship, we are both saying out loud that we need to attend to each other -- something we've always done but never really acknowledged.

Before the trip to Southwest Caye, with her fatigue worsening, Carol said, "I can't imagine getting on an airplane right now." She was in the middle of a chemotherapy cycle. I reminded her that I was starting to come down with a cold. An old shoulder injury and a strained ligament in one of my knees were also bothering me. "We'll just adjust as we go," I said. "But I'm getting too old for these red-eye flights, that's for sure."

"Enough with that talk of age already," she answered.

Carol is 53; I am 51. We met in college when she was 18 and I was 16 and dealing with sudden independence. A self-possessed woman with a head of thick, curly hair and a wry sense of humor, she intimidated me. That she felt shy and unsure of herself, she says now, makes me laugh out loud. Neither of us recalls clearly how we became friends. While I was rearing children, Carol worked on fishing boats. While I was writing books, she went to law school and started a solo practice in criminal defense. But even when we were living in different states and saw little of each other, Carol felt inevitably a part of my life.

She has always had the endurance of a sled dog, a comparison she would find flattering. (Carol considers dogs to be better creatures than most humans.) She's hiked and camped and kayaked, often alone. Once, when we were camping together in Oregon's Strawberry Mountain Wilderness, she told me she had never been afraid; she wasn't sure what that felt like.

### **Continuing the Fight**

When Carol was diagnosed, I was working as an oncology nurse. Her cancer had been stealthy; it had spread to her abdomen and bones before it was caught. We calmly talked about what to expect, but in private, I cried and struggled. I was juggling roles, both friend and a cancer nurse. Every cancer, and patient, is different, but the prognosis for stage IV breast cancer is bleak; only half the patients are alive two years after diagnosis. I knew this too well.

Carol began treatment with Arimidex, a new oral chemotherapy. She felt almost normal and went right back to work. The drug took. The tumors didn't disappear—they won't, because metastatic cancer is chronic—but they didn't grow either. She hated the idea of being seen as a "sick" person, a "patient," the idea of her crowded life—with her new role as a judge, her mob of five dogs, her huge vegetable garden, her many friends—becoming just about cancer. She hasn't felt the urge to start checking off wishes on a life list. She likes her life as it is, and most important, she likes herself in it.

Her powerful engine of health has paid off. After several months of treatment, we went on a dive trip to Belize's Turneffe. We planned a little more carefully than usual for emergencies. We both got travel insurance in case we had to cancel. She carried pill bottles, something she'd never done.

## **Flashing the Marine Life**

There's a new fashion among dive guides in Red Sea waters. They ask photographers not to use flash or strobes when taking pictures because it might disturb or damage the wildlife. The manager of Emperor Divers, a big Egyptian liveaboard fleet operator, asked me my opinion. This is the gist of what I told him.

I spend a lot of time underwater. I have been a full-time underwater photographer for 17 years but before that I was an advertising photographer for 25 years and did a lot of work with animals on advertisements for British pet foods. For those photographs, I used 24,000 joules of flash strobe. A typical professional underwater flash/strobe is about 40 joules, and a compact camera's light output is a lot less. You can see the difference.

My experience underwater is this: Animals ignore the emission of light from the flash. I normally use a fish-eye lens and get very close to my subjects, all of which have the option to move away. I also have a super-sensitive underwater camera that needs no flash, so I can directly compare both methods. What appears to disturb the animal more than anything is the movement, the actual noise or the vibration of the camera operating, and the looming shape of the photographer, especially if it obscures the light source (sunlight). Quite frankly, two Inon strobes discharged from a distance of a few inches seem to get no reaction whatsoever.

Recently, I made a sequence of a dozen pictures of a large grouper in a wreck. I left the wreck from time to time to allow disturbed sediment from my air bubbles to settle, but by moving stealthily, I was able to go back and find the grouper lying exactly where I left it. I'm sure that if it was disturbed, it would have swum away. At Cocos, I've lain in cleaning stations using a silent closed-circuit rebreather and photographed skittish hammerhead sharks that almost touched my dome port. I noted that if I kept still, firing my camera -- with flash -- when a suitable picture presented itself, they never noticed me. If I moved at all, they were off in a trice. I have a quarter of a million other examples in my picture library.

So I essentially told the boss of Emperor Divers that if his dive guides were really worried about their effects on the wildlife, they should get out of the water and take their noisy air-bubbling divers with them. As for their boats...

-- John Bantin

Carol was raised a Christian Scientist. This in part has made it hard for her to accept the pharmacopoeia of cancer; she resists taking the support drugs that help with nausea and fatigue.

She told me, "I don't want any doom and gloom." We did what we always do on our trips: dove two or three times a day, and then I loafed in the hammock in the afternoons, while she dragged a banana-yellow kayak into the water and glided up and down the lagoon.

Back home last winter, Carol suddenly found it difficult to swallow. Tests revealed a tumor wrapped around her esophagus. Her throat had to be dilated and that led to an infection. Carol spent days in the hospital and needed radiation to shrink the tumor. The Arimidex had quit working.

We went diving off Bonaire, and then Carol started intravenous chemotherapy. She and her husband, David, began planning an African safari, a trip she had dreamed of for years. As they worked out the details, her hair fell out, she vomited, and she learned what fatigue really meant. The night before she and David were scheduled to depart for Johannesburg, she spiked a fever of 102. Many patients would be hospitalized at this point. Carol is not like many patients.

"It is not safe for you to be on an airplane," I told her. I was scared for her; I knew the risks. I wanted her to be safe, but how could I suggest that she stay home? How could I not? She left four days later with a bag full of scarves and antibiotics.

## An Inspiring Anniversary

On Southwest Caye, we make small accommodations. Carol has less tolerance for the heat; she sleeps a lot and is slow to wake in the morning. There is persistent pressure in her chest, and now and then I see her touching her sternum, looking thoughtful. With cancer, every sensation is a symptom. But, as always, we take off our shoes and never put them on again. Carol makes friends with Ninja, a little terrier mix, and he comes to our cabin at daybreak to talk dog talk with her. I read trashy mysteries; Carol takes her Margaret Atwood novel to lie negligently in the sun. She finds a machete one day and tries to harvest coconuts. We notice the palm trees around our cabin are filled with grackles; in the mangrove, we spy a small green heron. The big sky changes constantly: heaped clouds and rainbows, rainsqualls and stars.

Sitting in the overheated shade one day, she tells me, "Today is the third anniversary of my diagnosis." We are quiet for a moment. "I thought I might never leave the hospital," she continues. "I just wanted to enjoy the little things—what was out the window. When no one was around, I would putter around the room. I actually felt peaceful." We have never spoken of this before; usually we are more glancing, touching the difficult areas as delicately as you would a sore tooth.

Morning and afternoon, we walk to the dock and climb into the dive boat for a quick, bouncy ride through wind-driven

## Should You Breathe Oxygen Before a Dive?

Physically fit sport divers doing conservative profiles (e.g., slow ascents, deep stops and safety stops) have only a tiny risk of getting decompression sickness. Still, DCS incidents range from inconvenient to disabling. Any additional steps for protection are worthy of consideration -- some hyperbaric medical researchers from France think breathing oxygen before a dive may be a good one.

Focusing on a technique to reduce altitude decompression sickness risk in aviators and astronauts, the researchers recently published an interesting study on the effects of breathing oxygen (O<sub>2</sub>) prior to a dive, and what it did to subsequent bubble formation in the bloodstream. Divers performed two openwater dives to 98 feet for 30 minutes, with a six-minute safety stop at 10 feet and surface interval of 100 minutes. Beforehand, researchers broke the divers into four groups with these pre-dive conditions: (1) Air administered prior to both dives; (2) O<sub>2</sub> administered prior to both dives; (3) O<sub>2</sub> administered prior to the first dive and air prior to the second; and (4) air administered prior the first dive and O<sub>2</sub> prior to the second.

Post-dive Doppler venous gas bubble scores were reduced in all pre-oxygenation dives. This effect was maintained after a second dive, without needing to pre-breathe additional

oxygen. Not surprisingly, O<sub>2</sub> pre-breathing for every dive produced the greatest reduction in bubbles. The authors concluded that O<sub>2</sub> pre-breathing has a prolonged protective effect because it decreases venous gas emboli formation, and could therefore be beneficial for multi-day repetitive diving.

So are these results meaningful and practical to the recreational diver? Possibly, but not yet practically. The amount of O<sub>2</sub> pre-breathed in the study -- 10.5 cubic feet per dive -- would be too much for most operators to supply, except if they charged hefty fees. If you brought your own oxygen bottles along, we can see other divers getting jealous and wanting a toke.

The protective effects of pre-breathing O<sub>2</sub> against suffering actual DCS remain to be proven. So while you may feel it worthwhile to bring your own oxygen tank, we don't see this catching on with dive boats unless future studies show blockbuster results or the amount of oxygen can be reduced.

-- Doc Vikingo

*"Pre-dive normobaric oxygen reduces bubble formation in scuba divers," by O. Castagna, E. Gempp and JE Blatteau, European Journal of Applied Physiology, February 14, 2009.*

swells. We get into our gear and roll into the clear water, sinking down like peas in honey. I can forget a surprising number of worries underwater. We take our time, pointing out a cowfish and two huge crabs shuffling back and forth in front of a crevice like gunfighters at high noon. The diving goes mostly as usual, but one day Carol feels something off in her regulator and signals me. I ask if she wants to surface, but she says no. We swim close together for the rest of the dive. I have needed her help underwater before; I am glad to be able to return it. There is new vulnerability in her, to match mine. She now knows what fear feels like.

In the evenings, we spend time at the tiny bar on the pier, watching the sun set and telling fish stories. One of the young couples on the island wonders if we are sisters. We laugh and say no, old friends. "Friends for 34 years," I say. I can see by their faces that they don't really understand that kind of time. We have been friends longer than they have been alive.

Carol walks along the sand each morning. "The morning light," she says, and doesn't need to say more. Her appetite for the sky, the edge of the sea, for the world, is constant and steady; she walks along the wrack with solid grace, looking down, looking up, back and forth.

One afternoon, Carol and I kayak out to the shallow reef. I'm pathetic in a kayak, clumsy and slow. Carol patiently rudders in the back. We tie up to a buoy and snorkel for a while. I find two Caribbean reef squid hanging in the sun-dappled shallows like mottled bread loaves with big silver eyes. She finds the biggest scorpion fish we have ever seen.

As we head back, we talk about summer camp. She was in Camp Fire Girls, I was in the Girl Scouts, and we both cherish those years. We talk about the special friends we made and how they eventually slid away. The sky is hot and blue, and ahead of us, the tiny island lies flat on the sea. I feel buoyant, almost

weightless on the waves. "Were you ever homesick?" she asks. "I never understood what that was about."

Between dives, we talk about where to go next. I make lists while she dozes. Our plans are more theoretical now, and the big trip to the South Pacific we hoped to one day take seems a long way off. Cancer has become part of our friendship. Some things have changed, but the biggest difference is common to every long-lasting friendship—the visceral reminder that our bodies are temporary gifts. Not knowing what comes next, having no idea at all what comes next, means anything is possible. Perhaps I will be hit by a truck, or my heart will stop, or there will be a shadow on my next mammogram. Life is dangerous.

We take our last dive of the trip. We glide slowly over the grand architecture of the reef. When we reach the wall and the deep blue water, we swim away. I try to turn a cartwheel, then a somersault. Carol lies on her side, an odalisque in a wet suit. Then, at the same time, we spread our arms out, like wings, and pretend to fly.

P.S. from Ben: Carol died on December 26. Sallie Tisdale sent this message to us in early June. "I haven't been diving since the trip described in the story, because she was too sick after that, had several crises and I can't yet imagine diving without her. We were perfect buddies and best friends and it's hard to think about yet. I am considering getting certified as a buddy for disabled divers, as I really was beginning to do that for her and it feels like I can't dive just for my own fun anymore. But I'm not ready yet."

*This article, originally titled, "An Adventurous Woman's Fight Against Cancer; When cancer interrupts a lifelong friendship, two women find solace in the sea -- and the strength to accept the unexpected," is reprinted with permission from Reader's Digest. Copyright 2008 by The Reader's Digest Association.*

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## Fresh Fish? Think Twice Before Ordering

### *your responsibility to the marine life you love diving with*

People are now eating manta rays. That right, those lovely creatures you spend thousands of dollars to dive with in the Revilligado Islands, Yap and the Maldives.

It's all because shark populations are crashing. While the market for sharkfin soup continues to grow -- hell, you can buy it at Chinese restaurants in any city in America -- the shark fin population is crashing. So Asian chefs are looking for a substitute and the manta is it.

If you've ever seen a manta underwater, you know it's an easy target to spear or snag with a hook attached to buoyant oil drums, against which the manta struggles until it wears itself out. Traditionally, they've been caught by subsistence fishermen

throughout Asia, but now there is money in that meat. Frank Pope of the *London Times* reports that in the eastern Indonesian port of Lamakera, catches of manta have rocketed from a few hundred to about 1,500 a year.

Tim Clark, a marine biologist at the University of Hawaii, says manta rays are being used as shark fin soup filler, with the cartilage being mixed with low-grade shark fins in cheap versions of the soup. While the rays, distantly related to sharks, are ending up in Hong Kong's restaurants, their gills are also being used in traditional Chinese medicines. "The big market is for the gill elements," says Clark. "They are dried, ground to a powder and used in traditional Asian medicines."

The manta's branchial gill plates, which filter plankton from seawater, can fetch up to \$325 on the street in China, because practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine claim they reduce toxins in the body by purifying the blood, Pope says.

Of course, news like this drives us divers crazy. It's the equivalent of roasting panda bears. Yet this is just one marker in the horrible tale of the destruction of the seas, which many of us unwittingly play in to. If divers had never descended on Cayman or Bonaire or Cozumel in the Caribbean or similar islands in other parts of the world, development would be far less, populations would be smaller and the reefs populated.

But today, it's a different picture. As we watch the sunset at the end of a day's diving, how many of us delight in ordering the fresh local grouper? Or snapper? Or lobster? And then

decry the declining population of critters on the reef before we've even digested our meal. Why do we fail to make the connection to our culinary habits? Sylvia Earle understands it. The renowned marine biologist doesn't eat fish and implores others not to. She has solid reasons. Here's what she told the graduating class of American University last year.

"When our numbers were small and the world was largely wilderness, we could sustain ourselves on the interest generated by a richly endowed planet. Hunting and gathering enabled a few million people to live more or less sustainably. [However], as biologist Ed Wilson has noted, humankind has had a way of eliminating the large, the slow and the tasty over the ages. On the way to developing effective agriculture, we managed to do in much of the wildlife that shared the planet with us. And although we should know better by now, we're doing the same

## Diver Deaths Around the World

The dive industry is tight-lipped about revealing fatalities and accidents, so it's hard to know how many divers worldwide experience them. DAN has a hard time enough locating details about U.S. dive incidents for its annual report, and we ourselves had to make some guesstimates for our two-part series "How Many Divers Are There" in the May and June 2007 issues (read them online at [www.undercurrent.org](http://www.undercurrent.org)). John Lippmann, executive director of DAN's Asia-Pacific division in Melbourne, Australia, adds another piece to the puzzle by giving global risk estimates for dive fatalities and decompression illness, in a study published in the journal *Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine*.

To estimate dive accident rates within Australia for the country's Department of Health, Lippmann wanted to compare them to other countries, so he looked at death and DCI rates published in studies done in Canada, the U.K., Japan and the U.S. Reviewing insurance records of DAN America members who died in accidents from 1997 to 2004, he calculated a death rate averaging 15 deaths per 100,000 divers, the highest rate in all the reviewed data. A search of Australian dive data calculated 8.5 deaths per 100,000 divers. A diver survey and coroner records of deaths at the popular U.K. quarry site Stoney Cove, led to a figure of 2.9 deaths per 100,000 divers there.

Because of how some other studies were formatted, Lippmann then had to calculate deaths per 100,000 dives. For Australian divers, the rate was 0.7. For U.K. divers, based in part on data from the British Sub-Aqua Club, it was 0.4. In Japan, based on tank fills and dive deaths in the U.S. military community in Okinawa, it was 1.3. Canada had a rate of 2.05, based on a 14-month study of tank fills in British Columbia.

Lippmann told *Undercurrent* the study's focus was not to compare differences between countries, but the data makes him believe there's not much difference in countries' fatality rates. The differences are based on dive conditions and the level of controlled diving. "The Canadian and general U.K. data came from cold-water diving, generally more demanding and likely to lead to a higher accident rate. The exception is Stoney Cove, where the water is cold but the diving environment is well-controlled. Most Australia diving is in more temperate or tropical conditions, which are more conducive to safe diving." He says the U.S. death rates are "not that high."

The same observations apply to global risk estimates for DCI. Data for wreck dives in the Orkney Islands' frigid Scapa Flow showed a rate of 188 incidents per 100,000 dives. In warmer waters, DAN America data for Caribbean dives had a rate of 19, and the Japan data was 13.4. But rates were lower for other cold-water areas: Canadian data showed a rate of 9.6, U.K. diver data was 5.2, and Stoney Cove was 3.9. Lippmann says that may be due somewhat to stricter dive training than what's given in the States. "U.K. diver training is more rigorous and divers had to be more qualified. They traditionally had to go through a club system, although that's dying out."

One finding of Lippmann's study is that it's still no easier to calculate dive-related incidents. "The more you look at the data, the more problems you find with how rates are reported. It's like comparing apples to oranges – dive incidents must be compared at similar times and rates, so collecting data to get a true picture is difficult."

*"Review of scuba diving fatalities and decompression illness in Australia" by J. Lippmann, Diving and Hyperbaric Medicine, June 2008, pgs. 71-78*

thing to the ocean. Not over thousands of years, but in decades. In the sea, we savagely reduced the large -- that is the whales, the dolphins, the seals, the manatees, the turtles. And with wondrous new technologies in just a few decades, we have managed to eliminate 90 percent of the sharks, the cod, the grouper, the halibut and other tasty creatures including the fast—the tunas, the swordfish, the marlin—and the small: the anchovies, the herring, the capelin, the menhaden. And more recently the slow-growing deep water species -- monkfish, Chilean sea bass, arctic cod, orange roughy.

That orange roughy swimming on your plate with lemon slices and butter may have been swimming two thousand feet deep in the ocean for more than a century . . . Some of the deep, slow-growing coral destroyed in order to catch the orange roughy began life when the pyramids were being built in Egypt. Wild-caught fish are not exactly like corn or rice or cows and chickens. They are basically bush meat, wildlife, part of what makes our life possible by making our life-support system function.

We have entered [an era] where one species has so altered the nature of the planet, the fundamental systems that make the planet function are at risk. What can you do? Be mindful of where in the universe you are. On a little, mostly blue planet that is wonderfully resilient, but not infinitely so. Remember that half of the coral reefs have either been destroyed or are in a serious state of decline. But half are still in pretty good shape.

In half a century, while we have consumed 90 percent of many of the ocean's big fish, they're not all gone -- yet. There is still a chance that they might recover if we give them a break. They might not, if we don't. . . .”

I think Dr. Earle's graduation speech was more optimistic than she is privately. For every dollop of good news that trickles out, bad news overwhelms. As divers, we worry about inadvertently kicking a coral branch, about dive operators that feed fish Cheese Whiz, or about people tucking “dead shells” into their BC pockets. But it's not enough. We must consider the impact of that tasty grouper dinner, knowing it may have come from the nearby marine park where subsistence fisherman are still allowed. We must think about the carbon spewed by dive boats carrying us to the reefs, and the airplanes to get us there in the first place. And we must think about how our high standard of living is forever altering our world. Maybe giving up a fresh fish dinner is something you're not prepared to do. But you must do something, I must do something, we all must.

-- Ben Davison

PS: To get a list of what seafood may be sustainable, as well as what species are crashing and should be avoided, go to [www.montereybayaquarium.org](http://www.montereybayaquarium.org) and click on “Seafood Watch.”

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## Flotsam & Jetsam

**Want to Dive in India?** We have just one reader report about this country's diving, but *The Times of India* reports that it's starting and promoting a dive industry. Bangalore, India's version of Silicon Valley, just created its first dive club to get people certified in city pools and plan dive trips to places like Goa and the Andaman Islands. PADI's Project Aware co-sponsored two underwater surveys at Netrani, on India's west coast, which showed an abundance of tropical reef fish and marine life. Giant clams, humphead wrasse, whale sharks, manta rays and other species were spotted by divers in the area. The surveys also report clear waters and a lack of large-scale trawling.

**“We Didn't Fake It.”** We've written in depth about Allyson Dalton and Richard Neely, the two divers who spent 19 hours afloat near the Great Barrier Reef after currents swept them away from their liveaboard (see our interview with them in the July 2008 issue). While the Australian government took their side and pressed criminal charges against boat operator OzSail, Dalton and Neely are suing the TV show *A Current Affair* for defamation. After running an interview with the couple, the show's producers then gave the perspective of Kylie Irwin, a dive instructor aboard the boat who said OzSail staff had searched for them exhaustively but the

two divers didn't want to be found. He said they must have set the whole thing up because it would have been “physically impossible” for boat crew not to have seen them if they had surfaced within 600 feet of the boat, as they said, and inflated their safety sausages. Dalton and Neely say their reputations have suffered; *A Current Affair* replies they were just giving both sides of the story.

**British Divers Save Australian Desert Bird.** The Torbay Sub-Aqua Club was in a boat half a mile off England's Berry Head when they saw a turquoise bird resembling a parakeet flapping furiously in the water, struggling to stay afloat. As it was very windy, it took three passes by the boat to collect the bird, and the divers doubted he would live. “It couldn't open its eyes at first,” diver Cathy Jackman told *The Times of London*. “He was like a floppy, wet rag.” But they took the bird, a bright blue budgerigar, to a nearby animal shelter, where it's recovering nicely. The Australian desert native is believed to be a pet that escaped from its cage and became disoriented over the ocean.

**Black Divers/Archeologists Win National Award.** A group of black divers from Tennessee received a Take Pride in America award from Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and a tour of the White House last month for their volunteer



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work in documenting historical shipwrecks. Diving With a Purpose (DWP) has worked with the National Park Service since 2003, meeting for two week-long expeditions every year to research and record the history of shipwrecks found in Florida's Biscayne National Park. After watching a documentary on the slave ship *Guerrero*, which sunk in Biscayne in 1827 with dozens of enslaved Africans aboard, DWP founder and retired repairman Kenneth Stewart persuaded four friends to turn their dive trips into archaeological adventures. Now they dive with pencils, rulers and compasses to create site maps and identify wreckage (they're still looking for the *Guerrero*). Stewart also leads the Tennessee Aquatic Project, which gets youngsters interested in diving, and he established a scholarship that allows one minority youngster to participate in the Park Service's dive archeology training sessions.

**Rock Star Trades Concert for Reef Cleanup.** After a concert was cancelled in Tampa, Aerosmith guitarist Joe Perry decided to rest by doing a reef cleanup in the Gulf of Mexico. The Rock and Roll Hall of Famer and his wife joined 85 other divers on July 11 to scoop trash near Lido and Longboat Keys, where they have a

second home. Perry helped to retrieve a big chunk of fiberglass, 20 feet of rope and an anchor. He told the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* that his efforts "makes people realize you can't just throw stuff off the side of the boat." The cleanup raised money for the Mote Marine Laboratory's Center for Coral Research.

**Turning Clergymen Into Dive Guides.**

Knowing people still get married during a recession, Pro Dive International owner Doug Huberman is using that fact to build business for his Fort Lauderdale dive shop. He wants to offer underwater weddings soon and is looking for pastors, priests and other clergy members willing to take the plunge. Debbi Ballard, an ordained Jewish cantor, is training to perform underwater ceremonies where the groom can smash a light bulb with his flipper and the couple can sip wine out of a sippy cup. She would wear a mask with a microphone to talk to the bride and groom while guests on a boat listen and watch through a video hook-up. Local rabbis are befuddled but say an ocean wedding could be legal under Jewish law as long as certain traditions are kept. Huberman plans to charge \$1,500 for an underwater wedding package.

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