

Scubapro Gobbles up Soniform

Will acquisition reduce competition?

While Scubapro is among the best-known names in diving, its parent company, Johnson Worldwide Associates (JWA), gets little mention in diving media. Nonetheless, it's a powerhouse, and it seems to be buying up all the diving business it can.

Its latest acquisition is Soniform, Inc., an El Cajon, California, company that manufactures BCs for the original equipment manufacturers (OEM) market — that is, they produce BCs for other companies to market under their brand names to retail dive stores. Soniform has produced BCs for Sherwood, Dacor, Cressi-Sub, Apollo, and Poseidon. In 1996 they generated \$5.5 million in revenues.

BC prices are already sky-high — not much less than a small Zodiac. We wondered: if Soniform became a supplier only to Scubapro, would it reduce competition and raise prices even higher?

For now, apparently not. Regina Franklin, marketing manager for Scubapro, told us, "Cal Mar produces some BCs for us and right now we do not anticipate any changes in that relationship." However, she said that "Soniform will be even more competitive in the OEM market than it has been."

Why, we wondered, would Scubapro's competition buy from Soniform?

"Soniform is not a Scubapro company," she replied. "It is a JWA company, and if they can produce a product for someone

for less money than they are presently paying, why shouldn't they do so?"

But Soniform may lose some business. Several years ago JWA purchased Divetronics, a Swiss dive-computer company that produced devices for both Scubapro and Dacor. After the purchase, Dacor dropped the line. Later, JWA purchased Uwaterc, another Swiss dive computer manufacturer, and it too lost some OEM customers.

The acquisition of Soniform does not mean that JWA (Scubapro) will have a lock on the BC market. Other companies, such as Durapro, Forte (Cal Pacific), Sheico (Mexico), Accario (Italy), Bagsport (Italy), AP Valves, Polygamma (Mexico), Cal Mar (Mexico), Divetech, and Zeagle produce for the OEM market.

In a related development, a few months back Zeagle Systems, Inc., won a settlement in a

El Niño Watch

While El Niño is wreaking havoc throughout the world, perhaps nowhere are the effects more stark than at the center: Christmas Island, or Kiritimati, in the Pacific nation of Kiribati. Here scientists speculate they are seeing the connections between the increasingly frequent El Niño and the dangers of global warming.

Rising only 12 feet out of the ocean, Kiritimati was home recently to more than 14 million birds feeding off the fish among the rich coral reefs and in deep water offshore.

No more. The birds are gone, the fish are gone. And, with the water temperature at an amazing 98°F, the delicate Christmas Island reef — considered by divers as one of the best in the South Pacific — is dying.

Sea-surface temperatures have risen nearly 9°F. The normal easterly trade winds have collapsed and reversed to the west, causing sea level to rise nearly a foot.

The normal upwelling of nutrient-rich cold water from the deep Pacific has been stopped by the reversal of the trade winds. The warm water has killed food fish or driven them to colder waters to the north or south. The higher sea level on the almost-flat island, combined with daily monsoons of three inches or more, have inundated the ponds on the island that normally are loaded with brine shrimp.

"It is dramatic and sad," says Professor Richard Fairbanks of Columbia University. "The whole system has collapsed. . . . At the rate it is bleaching or dying, by the end of February, most of the reef will probably be killed."

(From the *San Francisco Examiner* and other sources)

patent infringement case. Dennis Bulin, president of Zeagle, told us, "The suit was against Dura Bag/Dura Pro for using our patented ripcord weight-release system." Dennis Foster, president of Dura Bag, said, "We used the weight release system in one of the BCs in our line and dropped it from the line after the agreement.

"We are mainly in the OEM business," said Foster. "Some of our sales come from products we design and build and sell to other companies to take to market under their brand. In Europe we have four customers selling the same product but with four different brand names. We also build products to a customer's specifications. We have built for US Tek, Performance, and

Sandals. None of the OEM products used the ripcord weight-release system, so only our product line was affected."

Here's what this means to you as a consumer: when you buy a Scubapro BC (or any other BC, for that matter), you really have no idea where it was made or by whom. Those with the strong brand names — those marketed by the guys who spend big advertising bucks to get their name out there — always cost the most money, but then, you usually get better warranty service from the big names. So when you pay twice as much for a Scubapro or a Zeagle as you would, say, for a US Tek, consider it warranty insurance — but damned expensive warranty insurance.

Battle of the Titans

Who's the king of the food chain?

Who might win in a fight between an orca and a great white shark? No one knew, because marine biologists simply assumed the two giants at the top of the food chain avoided each other.

But then, wildlife watchers on an October Oceanic Society cruise near San Francisco caught a matchup on video. What a surprise!

Mary Jane Schramm told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that "We were on our way to the Farallones when a fisherman called and told us he saw two orcas kill a sea lion. By the time we got there, the sea lion was gone." But the orcas — a 20-foot female and a 10-foot youngster — were still there.

"Then we noticed this dark shape moving in the water, giving the orcas a wide berth," Schramm said. "The female orca suddenly veered off, on an intercept path." She surged to the surface with a 10-foot great white in her jaws. "We were stunned," Schramm said.

The whale swam away from the boat and thrashed the shark on the surface of the water, a practice orcas typically employ with their prey.

Peter Pyle, a great white shark expert stationed on Farallon Island, raced to the scene in a Boston whaler. He got within five feet of the orcas and began shooting underwater video. Schramm said "The female apparently killed the shark, but she didn't eat it — she was encouraging the calf to feed. [The calf] especially liked the liver."

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