
Hooked on the Reef

How to string yourself along

In a past issue, one of our reviewers mentioned his surprise when a dive guide on Palau took out a rope with a hook on the end, attached himself to the reef, and “surfed” in the strong current. Since then several readers have mentioned doing the same thing. Is it safe? Is it ecologically correct? In Depth subscriber Keith Reynolds makes his case. We would like to hear opinion on the subject.

There are a few places in the world where the diving is spectacular and the currents run like rivers. Blue Corners in Palau and Dirty Rock at Cocos Island are good examples. It is these powerful, nutrient-rich currents that created and support the great mass of sea life in these special places. As breathtaking as these dives are, the currents frequently encountered here are, at the very least, a huge inconvenience, and at worst, potentially very dangerous. In many of these places, drift diving is either not practical or not advisable; you have to grab some rock or coral and hang on. But if you lose your handhold, you could easily get blown up or down the wall faster than you can compensate, ending up either with an embolism or narked to oblivion.

One simple and cheap solution to dealing with these currents is a “reef hook” — basically a four-inch fishhook with about three feet of nylon cord, a handle, and for extra safety, a quick-release buckle. When hooked onto the rock or coral, you can surf one-handed in the current. Attach it to a strap or D-ring on your BC, and you can fly like a kite with both hands free to work a camera. When you get

really good with it, you can work yourself around to any point within a six-foot semicircle just by changing the angle of your fins in the current.

This simple tool has become indispensable to me whenever I’m diving on submerged seamounts with very strong currents, or on

walls with strong vertical currents, or just about anywhere else with currents I can’t drift dive. Now, I’m sure many would say it’s too dangerous to be tied to the reef in strong currents, and some of the more politically correct critics might even say we shouldn’t damage the coral with hooks. Nonetheless, people will continue to dive these sites, and if they’re not using a reef hook, they will be using their hands. The greater surface area of a hand causes more damage to the coral than the point of a hook.

As to safety, these are dangerous dives to begin with. You shouldn’t be diving in these conditions unless you are very experienced. The reef hook allows you to be more comfortable in the current and gives you one or both hands free to handle cameras and console. Attaching a quick-release buckle to the handle will let you drop the hook instantly if you don’t have time to work it out of a crack. ■

Got an Opinion?

How do you feel about roping yourself to the reef? Write us your views. Our mailing address is

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PUPPY PARLOR — ALL YOU CAN EAT. I’m not worried much about sharks, but catfish are another story. In February, Malaysian rescue workers tried to catch a catfish seen gobbling up two dogs struggling in the River Endau. Armed with 80-pound lines, they were determined to reel in the 10-foot-long fish “for fear it could swallow villagers amid rising floodwaters along the river

banks” (Deutsche Presse Agentur).

REALLY PRIVATE DIVERS. In our January issue, we discussed three traditionally designed live-aboards that were operating in Indonesia from Bandanaira, Manado, and Bira Beach in southern Sulawesi. The small vessels carrying four to six divers are being marketed as “Private Divers.” In fact, they were

so private we didn't give you the contact information. Phone/fax in Jakarta is 011-62-21-880-2218; in the U.S., call 212-995-0386.

NEW BLOOD. Don't buy that new tank yet: there's a team of British and Japanese scientists who think you and I might someday be able to dive without a tank! You see, alligators and crocodiles have unique hemoglobin — the molecule in red blood cells that carries oxygen — that lets them stay underwater for hours without breathing. When they hold their breath, bicarbonate ions in their blood attach themselves to the hemoglobin and cause it to release more oxygen into the blood. These scientists now claim to have created a molecule that is a cross between human and crocodile hemoglobin, a step toward creating artificial blood. Used to deliver oxygen to hard-working tissue, it just might give us oodles of bottom time and render guys like Jacques Mayol obsolete. [*Nature*]

ANOTHER REASON NEVER TO CLIMB INSIDE A SPONGE. The science journal *Nature* reports the discovery of a new sponge in shallow caves in the Mediterranean that uses hooked tendrils to drag down prey. Once the sponge has latched onto a crustacean, the prey struggles for several hours, indicating that there are no paralyzing or toxic secretions. The sponge then grows new, thin filaments over the crustacean, completely enveloping it in one day and digesting it within a few days. This extreme variation from other sponges, which get their food supply by filtration, brought speculation by biologists that perhaps the new sponge had migrated up from the deep ocean, where life has evolved into bizarre forms due to a lack of sunlight.

IT COULD BE CHRISTMAS. One of the barriers to getting to the little-dived Christmas Island (Kiribati) has been that Air Nauru flew in and out only once a week, or rather was supposed to fly in and out once a week. It

seemed that about 40 percent of the time the plane didn't make it. It might mess up my schedule, bring up the issue of divorce, and cause some job-related problems, but worse things could happen than to have to stick around and dive another week. However, to get stuck at the other end, in Honolulu, would be less forgivable. Frontiers Travel, who has been pushing this destination located just three hours south of Hawaii, announced that they would be working with a new airline. Air Marshall Islands has taken over the run down to Christmas, and its record for arrival and departure has been good so far. Now all they need to do is reduce the \$2,350 price of their seven-day package, and I'm there.

NEW TROPICAL SEAS. Stick around a few centuries and you might find the *Bilikiki* or the *Sun Dancer* off the California coast. Scientists have found that whole populations of starfish and anemone have migrated north in the last 60 years in response to rising ocean temperatures. They compared 1930 data from the same 35-square-yard patch of rocks and found an influx of creatures more common to Southern California and a decrease in species common in the original study.

NAPOLEON'S PROTECTION. The Indonesia Navy has been called in to prevent Hong Kong fishermen from catching Napoleon wrasses and damaging the coral reefs in the process. The fishermen are using poisonous potassium and explosives to bag the wrasses for a lucrative market. Hong Kong restaurants pay between \$115 and \$150 per kg (2.2 lb) for the wrasses, which can grow up to seven feet long.

The coral reefs of Irian Jaya and Sulawesi, along with other parts of remote eastern Indonesia, have suffered from the fishing. Indonesia is saying that it wants the fishing stopped and has imposed laws with heavy penalties of up to 10 years in jail and \$47,000 in fines for people who damage the environment.

In Depth is the consumer newsletter for sport divers that reviews scuba destinations and equipment. We accept no advertising.

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