

# undercurrent

*The Private, Exclusive Guide for Serious Divers*

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## SeaQuest Dive Center, Philippines

*a four-resort, 10-day dive "Seafari" for \$150 a day*

### IN THIS ISSUE:

SeaQuest, Philippines.....	1
Decongestants and DCS.....	3
Knives or Scissors?.....	5
More Philippines Dive Sites....	7
The Right Way to Store Your Wetsuit.....	8
DEPP is Shut Down.....	9
Feds Seize Cousteau's Boat....	11
Limits on Hawaii Spearfishing and Fish Collecting .....	13
Why Did <i>Galapagos Aggressor I</i> Run Aground?.....	14
Subscribers Speak about Shark Feeding .....	16
New Research on Shark Feeding .....	17
There Are Dives ... and there are dives.....	18
<i>Underwater Photography for Compact Camera Users.....</i>	19
Flotsam & Jetsam .....	20

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Dear Fellow Diver:

Every time I'm on a terrific tropical dive, the tune "Octopus's Garden" runs through my head. In fact, after a week in the Central Philippines, I felt I should be paying royalties to Ringo Starr.

This was my second trip to the Philippines, which still remains one of the best diving bargains anywhere. The first (reported in Undercurrent's September 2006 issue) was to sister resorts in Puerto Galera, on the eastern shore of the island of Mindoro, and Dumaguete, a little farther south on Negros Island. This time, SeaQuest Dive Center put together a dive Seafari for my scuba club. Departing from the island of Cebu (where SeaQuest is based), we visited four resorts in the central Visayan Islands during 10 days in June.

My first dive, in Maolboal (on the other side of Cebu from the airport), set the tone for what was to come. The crew loaded my gear on board the Hagabat "South Wind" in English, a typical Philippines banca with outriggers, a sunshade and bench seating. I waded out to a small speedboat, which took us to the dive boat moored farther out. I found my mask, fins and other personal gear stowed in a marked plastic bin under a bench seat, and took my place for a short ride to a site name Kasai, a dropoff maybe 100 feet off the beach of Sumisid Lodge.

My regulator, with a DIN adaptor, and BCD were already set up on an 80 cu-ft. aluminum tank. A crew member helped me gear up,



**The Hagabat at Apo Island**  
(photo by Nathan Colbert)



then walked me to the bow for a giant stride entry. We descended in two groups, each with its own guide, but promptly managed to get jumbled together on the reef, among profuse but muted corals. Using a pointer, our guide, Sino, pointed out a variety of anemonefish, the first in a wide variety of sea hares I would see, and four-foot hawksbill turtles, their shells clean thanks to attending remoras. I saw no sharks during my 17 dives, so the remoras evidently have opted for turtles as their hosts.

I'd been instructed to signal my guide when I reached 500 psi (50 bar for those using metric gauges). But in reality, the divemasters began moving us upward from 66 feet to safety-stop depth well before anyone's tank got low. However, those with stingy air consumption were free to putter around on the shallow reef top.

Ominously, I found a pair of cutoff shorts draped on the corals under the boat. Although virtually all our diving was to be in marine preserves, I was shocked by the ocean trash I encountered at every stop along the way -- clothing, plastics, even a gross lumpy diaper I wasn't about to pick up. When I ascended the ladder, I handed up the cutoffs, then my weight belt, tank rig and fins, and climbed on board. A crew member handed me a towel marked with my name, and offered a drink of tepid water, instant coffee or tea. But no snacks -- a shortcoming, I should say.

My itinerary included two-night stays at Sumisid Lodge, Apo Island Beach Resort, Coco Grove on Sequijor Island, and Oasis Resort at Bohol, back on Cebu. The digs ranged from Survivor-style (Apo) to outright luxurious (Coco Grove). When I first considered this trip, I was put off by the hassle of traveling to four different locations in 10 days, but SeaQuest handled all our transfers -- in fact, the entire trip -- seamlessly. Each resort was prepared for our arrival and had welcoming ceremonies for our group. Since we all enjoyed each other's company, the traveling actually became part of the fun, but not always comfy. Although we made some overland journeys of two to three hours between resorts in air-conditioned vans, most of our travel was aboard the Hagabat, with its Spartan amenities. The single marine head had no seat, and there was a bucket of saltwater for flushing. Toilet paper typically ran out before reaching our next destination. Lunches, packed by the resorts, tended to get soggy in coolers filled with ice. But in late May, our crossings were smooth, and the sea breezes helped relieve the muggy 90-degree heat. And the diving was spectacular throughout, with a few highlights -- and some lowlights, too.

Sumisid Lodge, a SeaQuest property in Maolboal, is rustic but comfortable. We reached it after a jangly, three hour, cross-island drive, and were greeted with cool drinks by attractive young staffers who promptly memorized our names. Following a buffet lunch of stir-fried seafood and vegetables, served in an open-air reception area with tile floors and woven wall coverings, I made my way to the adjacent dive center, right off the beach. Most of my group of 12, who preferred to travel light, were renting various gear which we had reserved in advance via e-mail. Our Seafari host, a Dutch expat named Sander, helped set up the new Cressi computers and described how to use them.

On subsequent dives at Sumisid and elsewhere, I typically drifted slowly along walls close to shore. My depth averaged 70 feet, with bottom times in the 55-minute range (longer for some women and photographers in our group). Visibility was about 75 feet, and the water 86 degrees, ultimately too warm for my rented 3-mil full suit, so I soon stripped down to a rash guard. (Not long ago, they were called "dive skins." I suppose by reinventing them as "rash

guards," manufacturers added perceived value for the wary diver; after all, who wants a rash?).

The marine preserves were dotted with mooring buoys, so we didn't have to anchor in the coral. But at a site called Talisay (named after a tree on shore), I saw old and new mooring lines chafing the reef. There was so much trash in the shallows, I gave up trying to collect it all. It was hard to believe I was paying a marine reserve fee of 100 pesos a day (about \$2.30 U.S.) and still encountering so much garbage. But the fish and critters paid no heed -- for the most part. Besides the usual lionfish, scorpionfish and pygmy seahorses, I also spotted a huge variety of sea hares, including two-foot horned monsters, sea cucumbers and white, wormy-looking critters clinging to the reef substrate.

After diving, I got a beer at Sumisid Lodge for about a buck, then strolled over for a \$7 massage under a spreading Talisay tree, eventually joining the group cocktail hour, where we entertained ourselves by watching silent heat lightning on the horizon. (For a diversion, one can also stroll down the unpaved street that connects a string of budget resorts and dive shops -- a very down-scale version of bustling Puerto Galera). My small room at Sumisid had all the basic amenities, including freshly ironed sheets each night. When I turned out the lights, the fan over my bed shut down, but the air conditioning stayed on, so I could sleep.

Breakfasts at Sumisud and the other three resorts were Western-style, with pancakes (which the Filipinos roll like crêpes), eggs fried or scrambled, sausage or bacon, cereal, and fruit juices (some from local fruits like mangoes). Lunches and dinners typically featured buffets of stir-fried concoctions with meat, chicken or fish with vegetables, and fruit for dessert.

I made two more dives at Sumisid. Off the nearby Pescador Island, I met a phalanx of cornet fish, while the surface overhead was darkened by clouds of sardines. The reefs were the most colorful yet, but most of this early-morning dive was in shadows. At Tongo Point, we moored in water so shallow it was

## Decongestants and DCS: No Link, So Far

Many divers use decongestants occasionally or regularly to prevent or treat congestion of the ears and sinuses during scuba diving. The more popular of these drugs include agents that stimulate the sympathetic nervous system ("sympathomimetics"), such as pseudoephedrine (e.g., Sudafed Congestion), phenylephrine (e.g., Sudafed PE) and oxymetazoline (e.g., Afrin Original) that work by reducing swelling in affected membranes. An association between using these drugs and decompression sickness has been theorized for some time, but until very recently, not subjected to rigorous research.

The first study to analyze a possible relationship between these medications and DCS was a Ph.D. dissertation completed last year by Richard Smerz, formerly the medical director of the University of Hawaii's hyperbaric treatment center. This was based on a sample of recreational divers evaluated for diving-related problems at the center between 1983 and 2010. It showed that while dehydration, repetitive diving, and violation of dive profiles were statistically significant contributors for

the development of DCS, sympathomimetic decongestant use was not.

However, this does not mean that sympathomimetic decongestant use by a diver is without implications. Not only do they cause dizziness and drowsiness in some users, anecdotal reports from Divers Alert Network suggest that taking pseudoephedrine prior to diving while breathing pure oxygen increases the risk for oxygen toxicity in the central nervous system. Research has shown that high doses accelerate the onset of "ox-tox" seizures in rats breathing hyperoxic mixes. In his dissertation, Smerz concluded, "Extrapolating our findings to humans, we conclude that the recommended daily dose of pseudoephedrine should not be abused prior to diving with oxygen-enriched gas mixes or pure oxygen."

On balance, sympathomimetic decongestants appear to pose minimal risk to divers who use them only as directed, and tolerate them well. Still, divers using them would be prudent to go easy on nitrox mixes and otherwise keep their oxygen partial-pressure to conservative levels.

-- Doc Vikingo

difficult to do a giant stride without crunching corals. Sino pointed out an electric file clam, with a red mantle edged in iridescent blue, which looked like it was giving off electric impulses. The night dive was under the Hagabat, moored in shallow water just offshore, so I skipped it (and subsequently got the impression that I didn't miss anything). Because it started late and would delay dinner, I went out in search of corn chips and ice cream.

The benefits of traveling with good friends made such minor inconveniences easier to take. If you take this trip on your own, note that SeaQuest and the resorts it visits cater to Europeans (primarily German and Dutch, as evidenced by books in the library). I've been in Pacific resorts where my buddy and I were the only Yanks, and although people are cordial, it can become a lonely experience if the other travelers stick to their native tongues.

Our next stop was at the Philippines' signature dive site: Apo Island. I had made a day trip to Apo from Dumaguete seven years earlier, and was eagerly awaiting my return. The walls at Apo are a tossed salad of corals, sponges, anemones and other colorful tidbits. In two days of diving, I saw every imaginable hard and soft coral, and some unimaginable ones, such as mushroom corals, which reminded me of oversized artichoke hearts before the spiky caps are removed. Feather stars and sea fans wafted in the currents as I drifted by. Blue linkia stars, some with one-foot arm spans, clung tenaciously to the reef.

In two days, we dived all seven sites on Apo's lee side (a marine sanctuary on the windward side was devastated by a typhoon several years ago). Our original dive guides had been replaced by two fellows who would complete the rest of the trip with us. Rudy was a seasoned divemaster in his 40s. The other guide was Yooly (pronounced "Julie"), who could benefit from some of Rudy's seasoning. He manhandled critters, showed poor finning technique on the reefs, and had a strange propensity for wiping his palms on coral heads. At Rock Point West, Yooly pulled a five-inch white nudibranch out of a hole and posed it for photos. Later, he folded back a carpet anemone to expose some clownfish, and dislodged a feather star while prodding a giant black frogfish from its perch. With limited English, Yooly couldn't even identify to us many of the critters he molested.

However, the 85-foot visibility and the variety of pristine, colorful corals and reef fish soon took my mind off his abuses. I swam among squadrons of giant trevally, spotted a star puffer in a barrel sponge cleaning station, and watched a seven-foot banded sea snake prowling a coral head. Huge turtles appeared on every dive. One, concentrating on munching sand, proved a very patient poser for our photographers. Other than turtles, the biggest critters I saw were black snappers and groupers. Once in a while, I spied a hulking potato grouper (also called "potato cod") circling warily at a distance. But the abundance of sweetlips, butterflies, angels, parrots, gobies, damsels and other colorful reef fish made up for the lack of big stuff. Not that our dives lacked excitement.

Titan triggerfish are famous for forcefully defending their nests, and several of us experienced their ferocity firsthand. The problem was that their nests are so well camouflaged, I didn't know I had invaded a trigger's territory until it began attacking. Fortunately, they generally attack from the rear, so the first sign of aggression is a tug on one's fins. At that point, the best defense is to turn over and begin kicking at the toothy attacker. That tactic not only keeps the trigger at bay, it propels the diver backward and eventually out of the fish's territory. But in one case, an agitated male chased off every diver, not giving up until our divemaster jabbed at him with his metal pointer, finally forcing his retreat. Triggers can inflict serious damage. Sander showed us a circular



A Cottage at Oasis Resort in Bohol



scar from a triggerfish bite that had taken a sizable chunk out of his calf 10 years ago. One would think that a savvy dive operator would consider the presence of these marauders when picking sites.

At a site called Cogon, my heart sank when I came across a ghost net 80 feet down. Sander tried to free a struggling blue-spotted stingray with his knife, but it was too entangled (scissors would likely have been more effective). Ironically, that was the only ray I saw on the entire trip. But, one must ask, why hadn't the dive operators on the island cut up and retrieved the net before it did any more damage? Despite this tragedy, my final dive on Apo was the most memorable, as if they were saving the best for last. At Rock Point East, I finned from a bottom of dead coral to a wall that looked like a surrealistic mural shimmering in brilliant morning sun. It was like suddenly being transported from Death Valley to the Grand Canyon, and definitely left me wanting more of this world-class diving. Some day trips from Dumaguete allow for three dives at Apo; the S/Y Siren, a 130-foot, traditional gaff-rigged Phinisi built in Sulawesi, spends time here ([www.sirenfleet.com](http://www.sirenfleet.com)).

Apo Island Beach Resort has the potential to be a very romantic getaway, with pretty little duplex cottages on a private cove with glorious sunsets. But it's an arid island, so all fresh water must be shipped in. Because there's no running water in the rooms, they provide a tub of fresh water and a ladle for washing up. You ladle saltwater to flush the toilet. The generator provides electricity only from 6 p.m. to 1 a.m. -- just enough time to recharge batteries -- so there is no air conditioning. Two nights in what I called Boot Camp was quite enough, thank you. The resort has a small dive shop that carries rental gear and offers lessons. During surface intervals, I waded over to the nearby village to check out other accommodations and shops, but none appeared up to the quality of my resort.

Lunches and dinners were served indoors, with dishes like beef chow mein, sautéed lemon chicken, rice, French fries, fritters, and salads of lettuce, tomato and onion. I waited impatiently for 6 p.m., when the blender could be switched on to whip up mango daiquiris, perhaps the major luxury on the island.

## Knives or Scissors?

Back in diving's early days, any diver worth the salt in his snorkel carried a huge dive knife on his hip or leg. Later, we learned those macho appendages were the first things to get tangled in kelp or lines, so we began downsizing to lower-profile tools.

Today, some divers carry smaller knives, while others prefer scissors, especially blunt-ended EMT shears made of stainless steel. Each has its advantages.

EMT shears can cut large-diameter monofilament, spider wire and steel leaders that can be a challenge for a knife. Good EMT shears can cut a penny in half. But hinge pins on EMT shears eventually rust and break, even on the most expensive models, so many divers buy several inexpensive pairs at once. One can buy EMT shears at most drugstores, and I found a three-pack on eBay for \$5.45. Leisure Pro carries XS Scuba Titanium EMT Shears for \$19.95: ([www.leisurepro.com/Prod/XSSTEMTS.html](http://www.leisurepro.com/Prod/XSSTEMTS.html))

Large-diameter ropes may be too thick for a pair of shears, so a knife, ideally one with both a straight and a serrated edge, would be more useful. It can sometimes slip into places that are awkward for a pair of shears. Knives are also useful for prying or sawing. Many divers find that compact Z-knives (which used to be called line-cutters) are effective on monofilament fishing lines, and safer to use in rough water or low visibility than a big knife with a pointy blade. Most dive shops carry Z-knives, and Leisure Pro has a Dive Rite Z Knife at \$19.95, \$3 off the list price ([www.leisurepro.com/Prod/DIV20592.html](http://www.leisurepro.com/Prod/DIV20592.html))

So why not carry both? That way, if you drop one tool, you still have a backup. It's best if you stow them where they can be reached with either hand, generally between your shoulders and waist. Some carry them in BCD pockets, attached with a lanyard. Practicing with these tools is a great safety-stop drill. Close your eyes and be sure you can reach and deploy each cutting device with one hand.

-- Larry Clinton

## SeaQuest, Philippines

Diving ( <i>experienced</i> )	★★★★
Diving ( <i>beginner</i> )	★★★
Snorkelling	★★★
Accommodations	★★★
Food	★★
Service and Attitude	★★★★★
Money's Worth	★★★★★

★ = poor      ★★★★★ = excellent  
World Scale

After two nights on Apo, and another mediocre stir-fry lunch, we loaded our luggage and boarded the Hagabat for a two-hour ride to Coco Grove Beach Resort on Sequijor Island, a trip from the ridiculous to the sublime. The sprawling resort is in a plantation setting with coconut palms and refinished wooden farm implements, fronted by a sugary beach. Chickens smaller than pigeons roam the grounds. Coco Grove sports two pools with bars, two restaurants, and lots of non-diving activities. I was delighted with my sizable air-conditioned room with satellite TV. After a swim and a shower, I did a little laundry and headed to the reception area for a Wi-Fi connection. A lovely thunderstorm serenaded me to sleep around 10:30.

The drop-offs at Sequijor were nearly as spectacular as Apo's, but a bit

sandier. Atop Paliton Wall, I spotted a pair of blue ribbon eels, a six-inch Christmas tree worm, a well-disguised scorpionfish on a ledge, and a clown trigger which seemed more inclined to amuse than attack. At a site named Maite, "cemeterly" in English, Yooly terrorized a slipper lobster to keep it out of the sand while photographers snapped away. At that point I decided to switch to Rudy's group, and I'm hoping that this article, which I will send to SeaQuest, will change some behaviors.

While cruising toward our final destination, Oasis Resort on Panglao Island, we stopped at another small island called Balicasag for two remarkable dives. At Black Forest, Rudy pointed out a black lionfish. I swam into a tight ball of 100-plus jacks. Later, I spotted a black unicornfish, porcupinefish, batfish and bannerfish, sergeants and sergeant majors, black-tail humbugs, five turtles, a juvenile striped catfish and a white-banded orange wrasse that looked like Nemo on a diet. After enjoying a sandwich and mango juice, I had another magnificent dive at Rico's Wall (also called Sanctuary), a sheer drop-off with vents, caverns and grottoes. Another school of jacks engulfed me, and I saw lots of cardinalfish and blue-fin trevallys, not to mention a large white frogfish perched in sea fan. Then, off to Oasis Resort on Alona Beach in Bohol, 45 minutes away.

The Oasis, with wooded grounds and a pool, was a slight step down from the luxurious Coco Grove. My large room in a duplex cottage had tile floors, abstract wall hangings and patterned curtains, a writing desk and in-room instant coffee. I arranged for a mani-pedicure on beach, then met my group for poolside drinks.

The next day, I chose to return to Balicasag, and was rewarded by a large pod of dolphins that played off the boat's bow. At Diver's Heaven, I watched garden eels dancing in the sand, and back at Black Forest, I encountered a silver unicornfish, two white porcelain crabs in a crevice, and more laid-back turtles. No octopus, but I could still hear Ringo singing in my head: "I'd like to be under the sea in an octopus' garden in the shade. . ." And I realized, I've been diving longer than that song has been around.

On my safety stop, I kicked slowly to the edge of the wall, peering down into the dark blue abyss. Now approaching my mid-70s, I relish moments like this because -- who knows -- this might have been my last dive. If so, it would be a fitting end to a 55-year diving career.

-- Larry Clinton



**Divers Compass:** I flew Philippines Air (PR) direct from San Francisco to Manila, with an easy, same-terminal transfer to a domestic PR flight to Cebu (\$1,636, including a \$40 travel agent fee); those who changed airlines in Manila had to take long shuttle rides between international and domestic terminals . . . My SeaQuest Seafari dive-group package, which included 18 dives, most meals and all transfers, cost me \$1,410 for a single supplement, and I was told tipping was unnecessary . . . For those not in a dive group, SeaQuest currently offers two Dive

Seafaris, one for 12 days and 22 dives at Cebu, Malapascua Island and Leyte for \$2,250, double occupancy; the shorter 5-day, 13-dive trip to Cebu and Siquijor is \$700, double occupancy . . . Although bugs came out at night, their bites were mild and the itch didn't last; our Seafari didn't take us into malaria zones, but some folks who had made side trips before the Philippines had opted for malaria prophylaxis . . . There's a recompression chamber at Viscom Station Hospital, in the Lahug district of Cebu City . . . Websites: SeaQuest and Sumisid Lodge - [www.seaquestdivecenter.net](http://www.seaquestdivecenter.net); Apo Island Beach Resort - [www.apoislandresort.com](http://www.apoislandresort.com); Coco Grove Beach Resort - [www.cocogrovebeachresort.com](http://www.cocogrovebeachresort.com); The Oasis Resort - [www.oasisresortbohol.com](http://www.oasisresortbohol.com)

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## Other Philippines Dive Sites

### *more destinations for cool critters and great values*

In the last decade, the Philippines has become a significant destination for divers because of non-stop flights from the West Coast, relatively inexpensive diving and accommodations, and its friendliness, not to mention its easily accessible, diverse and profuse marine life. Besides the Visayas, major Philippine dive areas are concentrated around Batangas (on the island of Luzon), Southern Leyte, Mindoro, Dauin and Palawan.

Dauin, a municipality on Negros Island, is home to Dumaguete, where subscriber D. Demming (Chagrin Falls, OH) has visited three years in a row. He says, ""The Atlantis runs a first class shore-based operation with excellent food. Tremendous muck diving, with macro dominating the pictures. Dozens of fish like ornate ghost pipefish and luminescent cuttlefish made each dive an experience." ([www.atlantishotel.com/dumaguete](http://www.atlantishotel.com/dumaguete))

But Bonnie McKenna (Kingwood, TX), found the reefs "suffering from the pressure of too many divers. The corals were almost nonexistent, colorless and broken. Fish??? I counted exactly two sweet-lips on eight dives. I think that, due to commercial and subsistence fishing, the area is fished out. The dive guides from Amontillado Beach and Dive Resort "fished for their lunch," she observed. "They were happy to be dining on a sergeant."

Most Dumaguete dive operators offer day trips to world-renowned Apo Island. While I described the Spartan Apo Island Beach Resort as "Dive Boot Camp," subscriber John Woolley (Olympia, WA) recommends the nearby Liberty's Lodge, where, "you'll find an incredibly friendly staff, very knowledgeable divemasters, a yummy but limited menu, visitors from around the world who are really interesting, and a community that welcomes you to their small village." ([www.apoisland.com](http://www.apoisland.com))

There are other side trips out of Dumaguete, such as whale shark encounters at Oslob, on the island of Cebu. Some divers avoid these encounters because local boat operators feed the sharks to draw them nearer. Yet Demming reports, "I finished the trip on my off-gas day by swimming with five whale sharks at Oslob.(Feeding) may change their behavior, but having been to Holbox for whale sharks, this was better."

## The Right Way to Store Your Wetsuit

Dear Ben,

I moved from Boston to Pittsburgh two years ago to care for a family member, and I do not know when I will ever be able to dive again. What is the proper way to store my semi-dry wetsuit? Up to now I have had it hung on a plastic diving hanger.

--Robert Goodman, Pittsburgh, PA

\* \* \*

Many wetsuit manufacturers recommend storing one's wetsuit by laying it flat, because the material

can develop a permanent crease if left folded for a extended period of time. The second-best choice is putting it on a hanger, but one that's thick enough to support the weight of the suit (dive shops sell wetsuit hangers; the thicker your suit, the heavier it should be).

Store it a cool, dry place out of direct sunlight. Moisture-free storage is essential -- if damp, wetsuits can grow fungus. Some divers sprinkle talc inside the wetsuits to prevent the fuzzies. Don't store it in the garage if you park a car there. The exhaust emissions can deteriorate the neoprene over time. Also don't store it near oil, aerosols or chemical solvents, as they can degrade the material.

-- Ben Davison

Donsol, at the south end of Luzon Island, is another popular whale shark site. Laura Todd (McKinleyville, CA) recommends Elysia Beach Resort, "with cool white rooms with French doors and new air conditioners, nice pool, shady hammocks and a pretty restaurant." ([www.elysia-donsol.com](http://www.elysia-donsol.com))

Todd reports that the Donsol whale shark trips are all organized out of the same center. 'You watch an orientation video, then they will organize groups of six to 10 on small local boats with a guide and spotters. In two outings, we swam for long periods of time (maybe 10 minutes max) with at least four different animals. We would get back on the boat and catch up to the same shark, and I would estimate that I got three to four sustained contacts with each of the four animals. The visibility was poor and the first couple times I got in were chaotic, but the guide pointed me in the right direction.' However, the *Southern Luzon Inquirer* reported on July 24 that due to rising sea temperatures and the stress of the many "interaction events" from December to May, there are currently only two juveniles in the Donsol area.

If snorkeling with hand-fed whale sharks seems a bit tame, you can dive with thresher sharks at Malapascua Island, off the northern end of Cebu. Stanley Zuk (New York, NY) went there in March 2012 and reported: "Exotic Island Dive Resort is very well run and clean, with good food, and great employees. The same goes for the dive operation, which is very professional, eager to please, and definitely the best on the island. Diving in Malapascua mainly caters to thresher shark encounters around the Monad Shoal underwater atoll, and each trip to see sharks begins at 5 a.m., because threshers appear early in the morning. I dove that spot nine times, and sharks were there on every dive except one. Their quantity varied from one to 12, and it was a very memorable experience. You must remember that by going to Malapascua Island, encountering the rare and timid thresher shark is the main purpose of your trip there, because the rest of the diving will not be as exciting, and it will lack rich fish life." (<http://malapascua.net>)

Mindoro is home to Puerto Galera, where a string of dive resorts faces a harbor full of dive pangkas. Ray Villemarette (Vienna, VA), says, "El Galleon Resort is one of my favorite places to dive. It has many opportunities to experience the effects of island tides and covering large distances in a short period of time. It also has 'canyons,' where you can sit below the current and watch the sea life above be carried past you. The water clarity can be excellent. The hotel staff is excellent, and while not a five-star hotel, it is more than comfortable." ([www.asiadivers.com](http://www.asiadivers.com))

In my *Undercurrent* review of Atlantis Puerto Galera in 2006, I advised, "Don't skip the day trip to Verde Island, 90 minutes away. Drifting along the drop off in 150-foot visibility, I felt that if



Yosemite Park were a reef, it would look like this. Speckled puffers wove their way between enormous sea fans. A four-foot octopus and an eight-foot swimming sea snake added more drama. I gawked at thousands of batfish, butterflyfish, bannerfish, angels, surgeonfish, clown triggers and other beauties sashaying among the jumble of corals, sponges and tunicates. Two great dives!”

Anilao, Batangas, is a top macro destination. Jim Willoughby (Bend, OR) picked Eagle Point Resort there and found the dive staff to be some of the best he has ever seen. “All of our gear was taken care of from day one.” One disappointment: “The resort advertised nitrox as being available but could not produce when we got there.” And another: “Anilao is severely in need of a mooring system. The rate of coral destruction from the boat anchors is going to cause a significant decline in the coral quality quickly if something is not done soon. That being said, Anilao has some really great diving and I would go back.” ([www.eaglepointresort.com.ph](http://www.eaglepointresort.com.ph))

Peter’s Dive Resort in Southern Leyte is a favorite of Carl Scott (Houston, TX), who says, “To all of the Caribbean divers, you really don’t know what thriving reef systems are if you haven’t been to this part of the world. This is true ‘aquarium diving,’ with the fish populations and diversity at a mind-boggling level, against a background of beautiful hard and soft corals, sea fans, and sponges. Macro life is also impressive, with good nudibranch populations, pygmy seahorses, pipefish, etc. Whale sharks are always present from December until early May (snorkeling only). However, I was not able to make the 30-minute trip to see them, because there were not the minimum four divers during my stay.” (<http://whaleofadive.com>)

But Curt Thompson (San Diego, CA) had a very different reaction after diving from the Atlantis Dive Resorts’s liveaboard M/V Azores last January. I was very, very disappointed with the quality of the diving. Yes, the reef was relatively healthy in places, but the region is terribly overfished, and the reefs are covered by crown-of-thorns starfish. In fact, the crew allowed us to help collect them on one dive to get them off the reef (the highlight of the trip?) ‘Southern Leyte’ must be Tagalog for ‘No Fish.’”

There are always variables, like weather, that can affect one’s dive experience, but one thing seems clear -- the Philippines definitely merit further exploration.

-- Larry Clinton

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## DEPP: Guilty of Insurance Fraud

### *how one of our subscribers helped shut the company down*

Once upon a time, the insurance company Dive Equipment Protection Plan (DEPP) was the darling of the dive community, insuring our cameras against flooding, our computers against loss overboard, and all our dive gear. But its claim-handling slowed, its payouts became lower, and its refusal to settle higher. We’ve written often about readers’ issues in getting their claims settled, but this story may be coming to an end. The state of Kentucky, where DEPP is based, filed criminal charges last month against the company and its owners, Dixie and Deane Lehrmitt.

One of the people responsible for that action is *Undercurrent* subscriber Simon Marsh (Caterham, U.K), who has kept us informed of his whistle-blowing. Two years ago he filed a claim that never got paid, and the correspondence he got from DEPP was laughable, but Marsh didn’t give up, and now his persistence is paying off. Here’s his story:

“I suffered an equipment loss back in April 2011. I made a claim from Belize where I was working at the time. I didn’t send the paperwork by courier, so DEPP claimed it ‘didn’t receive it’. I re-did the claim, got it notarized, and sent it by FedEx this time. Then the fun really started.

“DEPP does not offer a telephone number, so you have to email. I averaged three to four emails, each with a three-four week wait time, before I got a response. I felt like Dixie, the administrator [and co-owner of DEPP], led me on and just when I reached the right level of stress, she passed me on to Deane, the broker [her husband and DEPP co-owner], who is the ‘voice of reason’ and sends a lengthy email about how it’s the consumer’s fault why they are slow to pay. They appear to communicate with each other by email, and I was supposed to get the impression that he works for a different company (Innovative Programs Group), but as they are married, this is clearly crap, and they probably run this program from their home.

*“I eventually got my claim approved. They did no investigation and asked for no proof. I though this strange -- but then they had no intention of paying.”*

“I eventually got my \$3,500 claim approved in October 2011. They did no investigation and asked for no proof. I thought this strange -- but then of course they had no intention of paying! Six months later, they no longer made any pretence of paying, and they did not respond to me. I intended to do what I could to get my

money. I work as a cruise director on a liveaboard, so every week I told my story to the photographers who came on the boat. One guest worked as a private investigator, so he worked on my case for free. Another guest is in the insurance business and knows the Insurance Commissioner for Kentucky, where DEPP is based, and he promised to do what he could.

“With his advice, I put together a complaint against DEPP and the Lehrmitts, and submitted it online to the Kentucky Department of Insurance’s Consumer Protection Division. I sent policy documentation, proof that the policy was effective, and coverage showing the items I was claiming for were covered. I also sent the claim documentation and a chronological summary of each relevant e-mail that passed between me and the Lehrmitts over a period of 18 months.

“The department promised a two-week turnaround in its cases, but it took more than six months. I twice spoke to Rodney Hugle, the case officer. He reported to me that the Lehrmitts (eventually) responded, and they claim that I am not eligible for the money because I did not replace the lost gear with exactly the same equipment as lost. (This despite the fact that emails clearly show they had approved the claim). As a result of my evidence, the Lehrmitts’ response -- and that Hugle couldn’t find any evidence that they are licensed to broker insurance -- Hugle has contacted his legal department. DEPP continued to solicit business from the diving community.

“In March, Hugle sent me a copy of a letter that he had sent to DEPP asking for more information. Across the bottom was a handwritten note stating, ‘Claim is being paid in full, less deductible, via U.S. money order. A copy of money order will be sent to you so you can close your file, Signed Dixie Lehrmitt.’”

“In mid-April, I received -- out of the blue -- a payment of most of my money. I was not sure it was from DEPP, as it was a third-party transfer, and that party had refused to confirm the name of the sender. I wrote to Dixie to confirm the name of the third party. On May 9, I received a long and wordy email from Dixie, explaining the rules of ‘limit of insurance,’ basically telling me I was mistaken in my understanding of how much I was owed . . . and then telling me DEPP was going to increase the amount it sent me! She also wrote that I would receive the final amount no later than May 14, so long as I agreed to the increase. Needless to say, I agreed! On May 19, she sent me an email that the payment had been sent, and requested confirmation when I received it. But as of early June, I still had not received my balance payment.

“Then on June 8, I received an email from a Michael Johnson, special investigator in the Insurance Department’s insurance fraud investigation division, stating, ‘As of today, I filed criminal charges

against Dean and Dixie Lehrmitt. . . I need to know what is still owed to you so that I can petition the court for restitution on your behalf. I have been in contact with the Lehrmitts' attorney, and he has advised me that he will act as a third-party administrator to help settle the claims. The Lehrmitts are no longer allowed to work on your claims. '

"On June 11, I received the DEPP payment in full. The involvement of Hugle is the only reason I got my money. And the timing of the final payment, exactly three days after the email from Johnson, is no coincidence either. My advice is, if you do have an issue with a company that owes you money:

- \* Do not stop emailing or calling the company - do not give up. And keep records and a paper trail.

- \* Spread the word to everyone you meet so that other people in similar situations know what you're going through.

- \* Find out what state the company is based in, contact that state's insurance division or consumer affairs department, and make a complaint. It might help, it might not, but in my case, just look what happened."

\* \* \*

In the matter of Kentucky v. DEPP, we contacted Kentucky's Department of Insurance and spokesperson Wesley Sirles gave us this statement: "Deane and Dixie Lehrmitt appeared in Jefferson County District in Kentucky on July 10. Both pled guilty to one count each of fraudulent insurance acts under \$500. They were both sentenced to one year to serve in jail, but placed on probation for a period of two years. They were both ordered to pay a fine in the amount of \$500 each to the Kentucky Department of Insurance, and ordered to pay restitution on all outstanding claims through a third-party administrator."

DEPP's website has been taken down, but apparently current DEPP customers are receiving e-mails that the company is officially closed, and that the new administrator will be contacting them soon. We'll update you when we find out who that person is, and how he or she is handling policy and claims payments.

-- Vanessa Richardson

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## Feds Seize Jean-Michel Cousteau's Boat *but why was someone else given the criminal charges?*

On June 14, Federal agents seized the *Manfish*, a \$30,000 boat moored in Santa Barbara that is owned by Jean-Michel Cousteau. It was part of a Department of Justice action for transgressions during his team's filming of orca attacks on Monterey Bay in April 2004. Among the violations alleged against the 25-foot *Manfish*, Cousteau's crew interrupted a feeding frenzy by driving too close to a gray whale carcass, even inadvertently backing over the dead calf while the killer whales were actively feeding.

Around the time its agents seized the *Manfish*, the U.S. Attorney's Office filed a civil complaint for forfeiture, which allows the government to gain possession of a person's property without any determination of guilt. It's a lawsuit against property, not the person, so legal action has less to do with a person's guilt and more to do with the property's use in association with criminal acts.

No one in Cousteau's crew was charged, and the U.S. Attorney's Office declined to comment on its decision why. Yet Nancy Black, a marine biologist who helped Cousteau's team during its Monterey Bay filming, was charged with a misdemeanor for her role, along with felony charges for

a separate whale-watching trip. They're all rolled into one lawsuit that carries maximum prison sentences of 20 years and fines of at least \$100,000. Why the heat on Black, who was just another person helping on the trip, and none on Cousteau, who led the expedition?

"That's not fair. For them that's nothing," said Black, of the loss of Cousteau's boat when interviewed by the *Monterey Herald* last month. "That's what they should have done to me. If they thought I did something wrong, a civil fine would have been enough, instead of going through seven years of fighting a criminal case, but the government insisted on that."

***"He just forfeits the boat, while she has gone through years of litigation and expenditures."***

Cousteau was filming an episode for his PBS TV series *Ocean Adventures*, "The Gray Whale Obstacle Course," in April 2004, when his team was alerted to the epic spectacle of the orca attacks by Black. His crew moved the *Manfish* north for "the money shot," up-close and eye-level footage of the killer whales feeding on the flesh

of young grays. That's what led to the seizure of his boat.

Black, co-owner of Monterey Bay Whale Watch, helped out by providing two boats to help Cousteau's crew that day. On one boat, Black threaded a knotted rope through a piece of floating blubber to keep it nearby so crews on Cousteau's boat could better film the orca snatching it from below. Investigators from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) said she was "chumming," essentially feeding the whales, a violation of federal law. Black says she was merely using strips of blubber torn from the whale's prey, a gray whale. Regardless, in January 2012, she was charged with two counts of violating the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).

But NOAA was not done. In that same lawsuit containing the MMPA violations, it filed felony charges for Black based on a whale-watching trip she led on two boats on October 12, 2005. On the boat Black was captaining, a crew member urged passengers to make noise, but Black says she told him to stop. On the other boat, the captain whistled at a humpback that had approached the boat, hoping to entice the whale to linger. Back on land, the captain's then-wife called NOAA to ask if the whistling constituted harassment of a marine mammal. NOAA requested a video of the episode, which Black sent after editing out the noise-making crew person and highlighting the captain's whistling, she says, because that is what she thought investigators wanted to see. NOAA found no harassment of mammals, but it did indict Black for editing the tape, calling this a "material false statement." (Neither her captain nor her crew members were charged.) In November 2006, more than a dozen federal agents, led by one from NOAA, raided her home and took her scientific photos, business files and computers. To finance her defense, Black has cashed out her life's savings, spending \$100,000 on her defense. At the same time, she has become a favorite of conservative media and advocacy groups as the poster-child victim of government run amok.

While Cousteau got a lawyer, no charges were filed against him. California Congressman Sam Farr confirmed to the *Monterey Herald* that Cousteau had asked him to intervene on his behalf. After Black's prosecution, the case seemed to have drifted away.

That was until last month, when the civil action was filed against the *Manfish*, which Cousteau's team voluntarily surrendered. The complaint alleges that the Oceans Futures Society sought a "take" permit under the Marine Mammal Protection Act that would have allowed it to "harass, harm, pursue (or) collect" any live, dead or injured marine mammal for research and education. The permit was not issued until after the filming was completed, however, and was not retroactive. The complaint states that the crew's own film captured members hooking pieces of blubber, bringing them aboard to secure them with rope, then tossing them back into the choppy sea to facilitate filming of the orcas. At one point, the boat approached so closely to a gray whale calf's carcass during a feeding



frenzy that the orcas began making large tail-slapping motions and dragged the carcass under the water to escape the boat. When the dead animal resurfaced, the crew repeated its attempt, this time backing over the carcass as the orcas fed.

Cousteau, who is not named in the complaint, is currently in South America, but his lawyer, Lee Stein, gave us this statement: "Ocean Futures Society acknowledges that mistakes were made during filming in Monterey Bay nine years ago. No animals or marine mammals were harmed during the filming and this was a matter that should not have been handled as an enforcement case. Nevertheless, Ocean Futures Society cooperated completely with [NOAA's] investigation. The Department of Justice concluded appropriately not to pursue any civil violation against the Society or any of its staff."

## Spearfishing and Fish Collecting Limited in Hawaii – Will It Help?

On June 28, Hawaii's Board of Land and Natural Resources on Friday voted to prohibit spearfishing by scuba divers in waters off West Hawaii. It also limited the collection of aquarium fish in the area to 40 species. The new regulations will take effect once they're signed by the governor.

The scuba spearfishing ban was the most contentious measure. Nearly 90 percent of the 565 people in West Hawaii who submitted public testimony on the topic last year supported the ban. After hearing more than six hours of testimony at its June session, much from fishermen opposing the ban, the board approved it with a 4-2 vote.

As for the limits on fish collecting, Rene Umberger, owner of Octopus Dive in Maui, director of the Reef Rescue Alliance, and a significant source to *Undercurrent* on the status of reef fish in Hawaii, opposes the new rules. She says that while they appear to help reefs, in reality, their protective effects on Hawaii's disappearing fish populations and stressed corals will be minimal. Here's her reasoning why:

"These pending regulations would still allow open season year-round on the 40 most sought-after fish for the household aquarium market. Those include yellow tangs, four-spot butterflyfish, orangespine unicornfish and Hawaiian damselfish (the latter currently being considered for placement on the list of U.S. Endangered Species) The list of 40 species, a.k.a. "White List", was drafted with the help of aquarium trade members, with the goal of maintaining 99 percent of its current revenues. The only high-volume, high-value species to be prohibited would be the endemic Hawaiian cleaner wrasse and bandit angelfish.

"It's expected that collection of the White List species would increase to fill the revenue gap. State records show that in the last 35 years, many of the White List species have declines ranging from 60 to 100 percent at sites up and down the Kona coast. Yellow tangs have declined by more than 70 percent. The proposed regulations are critically flawed in ways that will only facilitate further decline: There are no limits on the number of permits handed out, and no limits on the number of fish taken, so species already in steep decline will be pushed even closer to the edge of no return.

"Those who supported the fish-collection rules include ocean-focused NGOs, including the Coral Reef Alliance; groups that depend on a good relationship with the state in order to receive grant funding (the man who crafted the rules is often on panels deciding grant awards); mainland aquarium-fish retailers like Petco that want continued access to Hawaii's fish; and locals who want fish collecting banned at their favorite dive and snorkel site -- but who were duped by misleading statements that the whole package must be supported or the whole thing goes down. For the record, the totals for public testimony on the fish-collecting rules were 2,590 opposing it, and 875 supporting it."

"Even the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources reports that the aquarium industry poses major threats to Hawaii reefs, and it's responsible for substantial declines in heavily-targeted fish. This led citizens, dive industry members and environmental groups to take legal action last year to require the Department to protect Hawaii's reefs from unlimited collection of fish and other wildlife for the aquarium trade. In May, a circuit-court judge ruled against the lawsuit on a technicality, but an appeal was filed in July, and plaintiffs remain hopeful that they will prevail, and that aquarium collecting will be halted while proper environmental assessments are conducted."

Mark R. Vermeulen, a San Francisco lawyer working on Black's case, told *Undercurrent* he doesn't understand the divergence of treatment for Black versus that for Cousteau. "He just forfeits the boat, while she has gone through years of litigation and expenditures. She should have had a civil penalty, if anything. NOAA has a record of giving civil charges for similar actions. She was charged with the felony of making a false statement, but NOAA is a department that focuses primarily on violation of marine sanctuary laws."

Black made a plea agreement so that there's no jail time involved, but there will be a probationary period and a large number of community-service hours. She'll find out the extent of that when she goes for her sentencing hearing at U.S. District Court in San Jose on September 10.

-- Vanessa Richardson

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## *Galapagos Aggressor I Runs Aground* *equipment or human error? the Fleet's not saying*

On June 13, at approximately 2:30 a.m., the *Galapagos Aggressor I* ran aground on the rocky shoreline across from Cousins Rock, northeast of Santiago Island. Apparently, no one was badly hurt, but as you can see from the photo on the next page, the boat took quite a beating. And it wasn't long before scavengers went through the ship and dived around it, apparently carting off passengers' gear, electronics and other valuables. Because Aggressor Fleet officials refused to answer our requests for an interview, we've pieced together the story as best we could.

Homi Adajania, a film director and dive instructor based in India, was on board, and posted his tale on the ScubaBoard online forum. "After an amazing couple of days of diving around Wolf and Darwin Islands we headed back towards Santa Cruz. I was asleep in a lower-deck cabin when, at 2:30 a.m., rocks scraped the hull below us, creating an unbelievably loud sound and vibration throughout the vessel. When she finally came to a halt, she slowly started keeling over to the right, and stopped at about 40 degrees, after which she started filling with water. It was pitch black and no one could tell how far any land was. The crew was fantastic, and after much difficulty in deploying the lifeboat, all the guests got on and went in search for the closest vessel, which was the *Deep Blue*. I came later on the second lifeboat with the crew, as they tried to salvage as much as possible.

The company has verbally promised to compensate us for all the gear and personal belongings that were lost. . . . I can understand that diving, like every adventure sport, is a calculated risk. But sleeping in your cabin while a vessel runs aground, to no fault of yours, needs some answers and surely some kind of compensation. At the time, they claimed GPS malfunction and a rudder breakage. Who knows?"

Roshen Amin, another passenger, also posted her story on ScubaBoard on July 1. She disagrees with Adajania, saying crew handled the situation poorly. She also questioned how well-equipped the boat was to navigate, especially at night. "Why did we hit the rocks, when surely these are familiar waters to the supposedly well-experienced crew? A captain's decision is his to take, but I would have thought that, knowing his depth gauge was broken ( he had told us that the day before) his one and only GPS was broken ( the crew told us that openly when we asked why we ran aground), and that there was a rudder problem (a quiet remark from a crew member the next day) he should have chosen not to sail on through the night. Or we could have stuck closer to the *Galapagos Aggressor II* and sailed with her. There were lighthouses around, surely he could have plotted his course. Even after evacuating the boat, we headed further out into the dark, moving into deeper water in an overpacked dingy. But at daybreak, and low tide, we discovered our boat was lying in pretty shallow water and the shore was not that far away. So why on earth had we headed out into the dark, deep sea, looking to be rescued when dry land was right there?"

She's also not happy with how the local Aggressor Fleet representatives treated the divers when they got back to land. "Peter Witmer [general manager of the Galapagos Aggressor boats] was so unhelpful, talking about going to see the turtles and carrying on like nothing much had happened. When asked to provide the Aggressor Fleet's CEO and President's phone numbers, he told us to go get it from the internet. Nice -- while briefing us on the turtles, of course. As a group of survivors, we have collectively and constantly been asking them for answers, for compensation for lost and stolen personal items, for information. However their response is brief. They are investigating, and until then we must wait. . . but hey, they offered us a voucher for the last dive we missed."

After these comments, the Aggressor fleet began to deal with the divers aboard the damaged craft as well as those with future reservations. Leslie Thomasson, who runs the travel agency Dive the Galapagos, says the Aggressor Fleet is doing a good job in relocating the affected divers, and that the Fleet is paying compensation promptly to divers whose trips had to be cancelled. "All of my affected clients have been very pleased with the settlement and Aggressor's attention to their claims. They have reimbursed everything from flight change/cancellation fees to a cancellation penalty for the Machu Picchu train that had to be rescheduled. It took longer for clients to provide documentation than for Aggressor to respond to their claims."

Dominick Macan of Dive Advice Travel says he's also impressed. "Three clients for whom we could not provide an alternative boat in Galapagos, were offered -- and accepted -- an option to travel to Cocos Island aboard the *Okeanos*, and were given full refunds of their international and domestic non-refundable flights, as well as the difference between what they had paid in Galapagos and the discounted rate being offered aboard the *Okeanos*."

And no one diving a Galapagos Aggressor boat after September 26 is affected. Thomasson says the *Galapagos Aggressor I* was always due to be pulled from diving at the end of September to serve as the daily tour boat for a posh new hotel the Ecuadorian owners have constructed in Santa Cruz. Macan says it has been towed to a shipyard, and the official line is it will be repaired in time for that date. The *Galapagos Aggressor II* will be taking over all Galapagos trips.

Thomasson says the Aggressor Fleet is smart in giving its "we're investigating" reply to the divers on board the ill-fated voyage. That's because there's not much the Georgia-based headquarters can do quickly when its boats are actually owned by people and companies overseas. "Galapagos liveaboards all have Ecuadorian owners, no matter who handles the marketing and sales, so resolving issues can be more complicated. In this case, the U.S. office can deal with reimbursements for cancelled trips post-accident, but must come to an agreement with the owner of the boat in Ecuador for compensation."

But even she is befuddled about how the accident happened. "My first thought was that someone wasn't paying attention," Thomasson wrote on ScubaBoard. "Anyone up to the position of first mate or captain can sail these waters without GPS. When I'm onboard, I love having crew members point out to me the stars they used for navigation in Galapagos before GPS. So I'm baffled at this [happening] on such a common route. And getting no answers when I ask that question. Maybe no one knows yet. It's easier to blame it on equipment failure than own up to incompetence or plain human error in that situation. "

Neither dive travel agent we talked to had customers aboard the *Galapagos Aggressor I* for that bad June trip, but Macan says he was assured by Aggressor



The *Galapagos Aggressor I* on the Rocks  
(photo by Homi Adajania)

Fleet president Wayne Hasson that “they have been taken care of, although he did not elaborate in what way.”

Neither Hasson nor CEO Wayne Brown, vice president Larry Speaker or marketing head Anne Hasson are elaborating publicly to anyone else either. None of them answered our requests for information about what caused the liveaboard to run aground, or how they’re reimbursing divers on that boat. Perhaps they’re still waiting for the report, even though it has been 90 days since the accident. As for the Captain’s Logs for each Aggressor boat that it posts on its own Aggressor/Dancer Fleet page on ScubaBoard, the *Galapagos Aggressor I*’s final log is from its trip from May 30 to June 6, the voyage the week before the boat ran aground.

Ironically, shortly after the incident, the Aggressor Fleet amended its web pages for the *Galapagos Aggressor I* and *II*, eliminating information about *Aggressor I*. Now it reads, “The *Galapagos Aggressor* departs from Baltra every Thursday afternoon and are [sic] the perfect platform for a Galapagos diving holiday that you will remember for a lifetime.”

- - Vanessa Richardson

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## Subscribers Speak up about Shark Feeding

### *the results? Seems to be split down the middle*

John Bantin, who makes more dives in a year than many of us make in a lifetime, wrote a commentary in our July issue about shark baiting and feeding, and why if divers want to see sharks, then there’s nothing wrong with either. We asked readers for their opinions, and whether they agree, or don’t with Bantin.

Many readers who’ve seen shark feedings say they don’t have problems with them. While all the negative talk in the past about feeding sharks made Rob Gadbois (Chicago, IL) hesitant to watch a shark feeding on a Great Barrier Reef trip aboard Mike Ball’s *Spoilsport* last November, he wrote “I enjoyed the hell out of it, so maybe I have changed my mind a little. The event was thoroughly professional. We had to line up along a circular wall and remain in place during the feeding. The white-tip sharks started gathering around; they knew the routine. Our divemaster pulled a large metal barrel full of tuna parts down from the boat and swam with it toward us, with the sharks following him. The divemaster attached the barrel to a mooring, then he used a pole to flip open the latch, and the sharks went at it. The fish snacks didn’t last long, and the white-tip sharks departed shortly after. Done in a controlled manner such as this without direct interaction between diver and shark, I couldn’t see the harm in it. Sure, the sharks know the routine, but it happens infrequently and in only one place. I am not sure it significantly alters their general feeding behavior with that one small snack.”

E. Webb Bassick (Bannockburn, IL) took his three young sons, to Stuart Cove’s in the Bahamas, and he says he never felt at risk, “not even when a 600-pound female swam right between my wife and me. Stuart’s people are professionals. And when it’s all over, the sharks disperse, they don’t hang around. I agree with John Bantin. When shark feeds are done in a responsible manner, like at Stuart Cove’s, I don’t believe there is anything wrong with it. In fact, our family would say that the feed was the highlight of our diving!

Michael Craghead (Sterling, VA) knows he won’t see sharks on dive trips any other way without baiting involved. “I laugh whenever I talk to non-divers or new divers about sharks. They seem to think that as soon as you dip a toe in the water, the sharks will come. Nothing could be further from the truth. It usually takes effort to get sharks to come into view. But I also think there are many dive operators that



will try to stay away from areas where sharks might be prominent, to avoid any liability if someone gets bitten. I'm a big boy. My liability agreement should cover that, and I'm willing to take the risk."

### Those Against It

Ross Goldbaum (Hillsborough, NC) hasn't been on a shark-feeding dive, nor does he want to after his daughter told him about her baited shark dive near Durban, South Africa. "She enjoyed the first dive of the day, but on the second dive she was nervous, because the sharks seemed more energized, frenetic and erratic." The fact that there are no studies proving that shark baiting doesn't teach sharks to associate divers with food really doesn't mean much. I would no more hang around a chumsicle that sharks are hitting than I would put out a side of bacon in grizzly bear country and wait around to get an up-close look. I suppose you can argue that baited shark dives offer another economic argument for shark preservation to counteract the profit incentive of finning them. But at the end of the day, the baited dives seem gimmicky to me."

Davis Scott (Cape Coral, FL) has been on shark-encounter dives, and says "it's no more natural than tossing a ham hock into a pit of hungry gators, or a garbage can into a group of bears. The shark or

## New Research: Shark Feeding May Not Affect Behavior

Shark-based tourism that uses bait to reliably attract shark so that divers can view them is a growing industry, but remains controversial. Some people argue it irretrievably changes shark behavior, but one study, recently published online at *PLOS ONE*, suggests the contrary. Here is a summary.

Over seven years, the study's two researchers tracked 48 bull sharks from a long-term shark feeding site at Fiji's Shark Reef Marine Reserve, and reefs along the Beqa Channel on the southern coast of Viti Levu. It became apparent that the sharks are not permanent residents of the marine reserve, but use the broader southern coast of Viti Levu as their stomping ground. While individual behavior varied, most are attracted to the feeding site if they're in the area, regardless of whether it's a feeding or non-feeding day, but they remain for more consecutive hours on feeding days. Some nearby individuals do not come to the feeding site, even if food is being offered.

Bull sharks can be considered typical "wild animals" that are generally human-averse. They tend to avoid the area when humans are present, and hence food provisioning is essential to elicit human-oriented behavior. The observed sharks use the area around the feeding site in the morning before spreading out over Shark Reef throughout the day, then dispersing over the entire area at night, perhaps foraging in the mouth of the Navua River mouth or even upriver at night. They intermittently leave the area for a few consecutive days throughout the year, and for weeks to months at the end of the calendar year before returning to the feeding site. It remains unknown where they exactly reproduce.

While bull sharks respond to the food when encountering it, the feeding operation does not appear to drive their long-term movements. The sharks are not strongly conditioned, otherwise they would be expected to be at almost every feed. Evidence is accumulating that chumming and food provisioning are unlikely to fundamentally change movement patterns over time through large areas, and seem to only have a minor impact on the behavior of large predatory sharks.

But despite the behavior and movement patterns found in this and previous studies being regarded as "normal," it is possible that the hand-feeding of sharks at Shark Reef for more than a decade has been attracting bull sharks to the area, and that individual sharks visit Shark Reef more often and/or spend more time in the area. This may raise concerns about increased susceptibility to local fishing. However, the feeding operation researchers looked at is closely linked to a local marine conservation project which protects all sharks in the marine reserve and adjacent coastal areas. The Shark Reef Marine Reserve is another example of how shark-feeding tourism can be an effective strategy that can contribute to apex predator conservation, this time for bull sharks.

*"Opportunistic Visitors: Long-Term Behavioural Response of Bull Sharks to Food Provisioning in Fiji," by JM Brunnschweiler and A. Barnett; published March 2013 in PLoS ONE 8(3): e58522. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0058522*

better yet, schools of sharks doing their own thing, to me that is the object of awe and beauty. Feeding sharks for money, in my opinion, is a sleazy way to get a photo or jack up a dozen paying neophyte divers, purely a lowbrow way to promote a commercial enterprise.”

Rich Greenberg (Sarasota, FL), says it short and sweet: “Mother Nature knows what she is doing. Humans shouldn’t interfere.”

Tom Whitaker (Pacifica, CA) is also short, but not so sweet regarding Bantin writing about feeding sharks on his dives. “This guy is a dangerous idiot. I shudder at the thought of being on a liveaboard with this arrogant jerk.”

### **A Better Way?**

Harvey Cohen (Middlefield, NJ) wants to highlight the difference between baiting and hand-feeding. “Any personal interaction with sharks or other predators teaches the wrong thing to both the animals and the divers. I don’t want predators to associate my hands with food. On the other hand, enhancing the economic value of live sharks is a powerful argument. The shark experiences run by *AquaCat* and *Spirit of Freedom*, where the divers are planted in a circle on the sea floor, while a chumsicle or chum can be suspended a good distance above, seem like a good model.”

There are no long-term, scientific studies on this matter, but if we had those, the dive industry could come up with the right way to run these shark-human interactive trips that would be beneficial for both sharks and humans, says Henry Schwarzberg (Mobile, AL). “Because there are so many operators running bad shark-feeding operations, the safest course of action would be to fund scientific studies, and then license operators to conduct the feedings in accordance with standards set as a result of those studies. Then shark feeding could be banned for all except licensed operators who follow established protocols. If those standards could be established worldwide, all the better. And maybe these studies could convince people in Third World countries that sharks are worth more when valued for tourism than when they are finned cruelly and left to die.”

- - Ben Davison

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## **There Are Dives . . .**

*. . . and then there are “dives”*

In the former, it is surprising that some divers survive. This is because of extreme depth, absurd diving times or hostile surroundings. Indeed, there are subjects who dive to more than 200 meters, for more than 12 hours, inside dark caves, carrying lots of ironware. And paradoxically, while surfacing, they do not feel relief that they are still alive, but they are already planning the next dive, even deeper, even longer, always challenging.

In the latter, it is surprising that a diver dies: The water is warm and clean, the body is healthy and the technical equipment works fine. But something happens and things go so badly that the diver will not have any opportunity to work out the lesson. Death comes.

In fact, the fatality rate in recreational diving is half of the death rate from injuries in the general population, and is similar to the death rate due to heart attack while jogging. If one accepts this risk, it means that . . . every day somewhere in the world, underwater deaths will always be with us. This is due to the fatal combination of ruthless numbers and general truth, described by the British mathematician Augustus De Morgan who, in 1866, wrote: “Whatever can happen, will happen if we make trials enough.” This adage, often later referred to as “Murphy’s Law,” essentially states, “Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.”

What we can do later, after the post-mortem examination of the diver's corpse, is the analysis of factors involved in the accident. And there is the root cause analysis, which is a useful tool for decoding the chain of death sequence. This method identifies the sequence of events preceding an untoward outcome. The first link in the chain is the "trigger" or "the earliest identifiable event that appears to transform an unremarkable dive into an emergency." The second step, linked with the trigger, is the "disabling agent," a "hazardous behavior or circumstance that was temporally or logically associated with the trigger and perhaps caused the event" Both links -- trigger and disabling agent -- are the last steps before the fall. If a diver will not take corrective measures, he/she can progress into the horror of an accident, when the window of opportunity for survival shrinks rapidly. The "disabling injury" comes at this point, the step "directly responsible for death or for incapacitation followed by death due to drowning." The final step, "cause of death," is "specified by the medical examiner."

The method of root cause analysis has been used successfully for investigation of accidents on dry land, and it was introduced in diving in 2008 by a team led by Petar DeNoble, director of medical research at Divers Alert Network. Using this method, the group analyzed 351 diving fatalities observed over 34 years (1972-2005) in a paper presented in the journal *Underwater and Hyperbaric Medicine*. More than one-third of the triggers were related to equipment or gas supply (each accounting for 18 percent of accidents), and almost 50 percent of the cases were covered by gas supply or ascent-related disabling agents. Those findings strongly support the "first rule of safe diving": Never dive alone.

While there are some exceptions to this rule, the golden truth is still valid: Always have spare air (particularly on a buddy), and do not treat escape to the surface as an emergency exit. Try to solve the problem with your buddy while underwater.

*Jacek Kot, M.D., is the international editor of the journal Underwater and Hyperbaric Medicine, and a professor at the National Center for Hyperbaric Medicine, Medical University of Gdansk, Poland. This editorial, which Undercurrent has shortened, appeared in Underwater and Hyperbaric Medicine, vol 40, no.1. In future issues, we will report on the analysis of diver deaths referred to by Kot.*

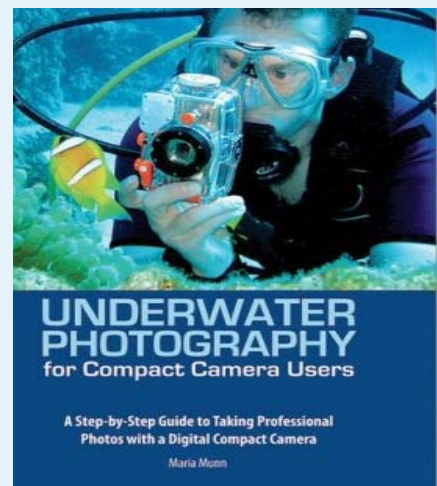
## ***Underwater Photography for Compact Camera Users***

Today's compact camera systems can give sophisticated SLR setups a run for their money when it comes to fabulous shots, and they can do so at a fraction of the price and the bulkiness. But many divers who bring them along underwater still need to know how to use them. They often turn to Maria Munn for help to improve their techniques, and her compact-camera courses, held in her native Britain and on liveboards abroad, fill up quick.

Now she has placed the knowledge and tips from her courses into this 175-page book, with easy-to-follow techniques opposite hundreds of full-color photographs to show how easily it can be done, and what results can be achieved. Besides her written how-tos, Munn's photos show the effects of different f-stops, ISO and aperture settings. Beginners will get good advice on what type of compact camera to

buy, how to master the settings and how to frame great photos. No computer tricks described here -- all the advice focuses on handling the camera itself. Munn writes in an easy, conversational manner that doesn't confuse the beginner or patronize the advanced users.

Go to **www.undercurrent.org** -- the book is featured on the home page for you to buy from us via Amazon, and the profits we receive from your purchase go to preserving coral reefs.



# Flotsam & Jetsam

**Queensland Diving Is Now Cheaper.** After seeing divers flock to other parts of the Great Barrier Reef, this Australian state's government decided to woo them back by making a previously mandatory medical certificate for first-time divers now only required for people considered "at risk" (meaning they have a risky medical condition, or are over age 45, or have a body mass index over 30 and a waist circumference greater than 40 inches for males and 34 inches for females). That certificate costs up to \$100 and isn't required in any other Australian or Asia Pacific jurisdiction, so divers chose with their wallets. Another new regulation: Two crew members instead of one are now required to count and compare the number of people on board to ensure no one is left behind or still underwater.

**But Is Diving There Safer?** Two U.S. fighter jets dropped four unarmed bombs onto a Queensland section of the Great Barrier Reef last month when a training exercise went wrong. The two AV-8B Harrier jets launched from aircraft carrier *USS Bonhomme Richard*, and each had intended to drop two bombs on the Townshend Island bombing range, but when controllers reported the area was not clear of hazards, the pilots aborted the mission because they were low on fuel and could not land with their load. So they dumped the four bombs, weighing about 4,000 pounds, into 165 feet of water and away from coral to minimize damage to the reef. None exploded. But an angry Senator Larissa Waters asked on an interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, "Is this how we look after our World Heritage area now? Letting a foreign power drop bombs on it? Have we gone completely mad?"

**Tag Turtles and Sharks at Cocos.** Turtle Island Restoration Network does an honorable job in saving sea turtles worldwide, but it needs the help of divers,

both financially and physically, to do so. It's hosting its bi-annual 12-day dive research trip to Cocos Island November 10-22, aboard the 130-foot liveaboard *Argo*, and letting divers tag and track sea turtles and sharks in order to protect their migration routes. The cost, which includes meals, nitrox fills, marine park fee and transfers from hotel to the dock, is \$7,210, which can be tax-deductible, as it helps finance the research expedition. For more information, go to <http://seaturtles.org/events>.

**The Misery of Coach.** When I'm on a long-haul flight and stuck in coach, the only way I can catch some sleep, even with drugs, is with a neck pillow. I've tried many and never found a perfect one, but this new Cabeau Evolution Pillow seems impressive. I admit to not having tried it yet, but I decided to pass on this blog post about it, because if you're flying across oceans soon and are looking to decrease the suffering, this pillow just might be the ticket. Read more at <http://blog.thetravelinsider.info/2013/07/a-great-solution-to-airplane-stiff-neck-syndrome.html>

**What Should a Dive Shop Smell Like?** British Airways adds scents to its airplanes, Victoria's Secret adds scents to its stores. Funeral homes and medical offices are jumping in to the world of "scent logos" too. So why not dive shops? *Dive Center Business* recently published results of a scent study done by Manja Zisensewk, a doctoral candidate at Washington State University doctoral. She mixed the smells of orange, tea and basil in a scent that was sprayed in a home-decorating store. Sales increased by 20 percent. But as the *Dive Center Training* article states, "Finding a signature scent for your dive shop is no small order, considering the wrong one can turn off a customer more than no scent at all. While "ocean" scent is used successfully in hotels, other smells related to diving, such as sunblock or coconuts, haven't been tested. On the other hand, the smell of chocolate chip cookies has been shown in experiments to inspire women on tight budgets to splurge. Still, your scent needs to match you brand." What about the scent of a wetsuits after a three-tank dive day?

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