

WE ARE JUST A LOAD OF LEMMINGS

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Equipment, recreational diving, safety, training.

Why do sport divers make life so difficult and unsafe for themselves, using kit which no self respecting professional would countenance? There are three areas crying out for improvement.

We were in the shadowy lee of a wreck in Australia. While I, a mere trainee, satisfied myself with the bizarre sensation of exploring a man-made object in 3D flight, my buddy was after crayfish. Spotting a likely nook in the hull, he disappeared into it like a mole, leaving only a pair of huge neoprene buttocks and failing fins in view. His arms must have been working like mechanical grabs, stuffing bewildered crustaceans into a heaving catch bag. Then came the extraordinary sight of my buddy reversing abruptly out of the hole, like a cork from a bottle. He executed a neat handbrake turn and shot towards me, beard trailing attractively in his wake. His eyes bulged like ping-pong balls, and one hand extended towards me in a crooked claw. Remembering my drills, I carefully angled my shiny new octopus towards him. He arrived a nano-second later, 15 stone (95.5 kg) of barrelling Australian. Colliding with me, he grabbed my regulator from my slack jaw, and sucked in whooping lungfuls of air, leaving me to wrestle with him, my octopus and my rising sense of indignation. We moved towards the surface, me glowering reproachfully.

It has dawned on me that we run-of-the-mill sport-diver types take part in one of the most dangerous forms of diving. Cave and free-divers might just pip us, but compared to technical, commercial, police, media and scientific divers, we ask for trouble every time we enter the water. Credit for this theory must go to veteran commercial divers Mark Hagger and Martin Versvelt. Through long debate they have brought me round to the view that we sport divers are naive, outdated, resistant to change and bent on ignoring fundamental truths about safety.

The first big issue leaves other sections of the diving community agog at our rampant stupidity. Most of us (BSAC divers with an in-built bottle in their BCs are excused here) dive without an alternative air source. And before you start waving your yellow octopus at me, that isn't an alternative, it's another regulator running off the same first stage. Why do divers in every other sector insist on a totally redundant system to supply them should their main supply cut out? Because they have learned the hard way. Try to get a working dive using only a single cylinder in even just a choppy sea past a Health and Safety risk assessment, and you would be laughed out of the rather oily Portakabin from which these chaps seem to operate.

Try to get a military or police diver to dive under such circumstances and you would be taken round the back and beaten by large men in moustaches. Yet we crawl over wrecks, clamber over line-strewn reefs and drift in limited visibility into God knows what, while breathing wheezily from our single cylinder. If that packs up, there's always your buddy, of course, if you can find him, if he can get his octopus released in time, if you both remember your drills. And you can put that Spare Air away, too, don't even start me on that. But wouldn't it make sense to have some sort of official insistence that all divers carry a totally independent alternative air source?

On to weight belts: why do we insist on holding them on with a simple clip that can be flipped open if you catch it on something, invariably with a flapping length of belt sticking out from the buckle, as we've been carefully taught to leave it loose? Most of us have experienced losing or nearly losing a belt, or know someone who has. The solution? A sequential release (thank you, Martin Versvelt). Not nine different straps and pulleys, but a simple, standardised pin and clip. You pull the pin, you flip the clip. Incorporate it in training, and it would be second nature within weeks. Had we always dived with a Pin-and-clip-release weight belt, and someone appeared with just a clip and a flapping loose end of belt, he would be laughed off the boat.

Dive kit has a large fashion element to it. A few years ago, large knives were out, the smaller the knife, the more PC you were. I sported a veritable toothpick tiny and subtle, sufficiently understated to let people know I had no issues with my masculinity, and didn't require nine inches of gleaming blade to justify the pitiful contents of my PADI posing pouch. Bring big knives back! The ones with a hammer thing in the handle, and a bloody great big serrated edge. And that phone cord thing holding it onto your thigh. Why? Because it's a tool. The chances of having to hammer, hack or saw your way out of a crisis are slim, but if you have to, better to be wielding a Neptune Big Boy than a Gucci Silver.

Next time you dive, pause for thought. You or someone else could be about to enter the water on a 30 m wreck dive with a single cylinder, a tenuously clipped-on weight belt and a tiny daggerette. Would a working diver do the same dive with your gear? No, and I reckon there's a reason for that.

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