

ARTICLES OF INTEREST FREPRINTED FROM OTHER JOURNALS

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

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Many people would like to believe that the secret of a happy life can be reduced to a few rules, which, if held inviolate, would guarantee success. No doubt there are some that feel the Ten Commandments satisfy that requirement. They provide a sense of security to those bewildered by life's complexities and I am not knocking it.

In fact I personally believe that in order to be happy, though human, it is best try to understand human nature and follow the fundamental truths that wise people have passed on through the ages. This is why I always remember my wife's birthday, and never start a dive cruise on a Friday.

Alas humans are far from perfect, and although this fact is well known, many people, proving the point, still confuse the way we should behave, if we were all good and nice, with the way we actually behave, rather more selfish and sinful.

It is this difference of course which has doomed Socialism to the dustbin of history. It is all very well to say "From each according to ability, to each according to need" but human nature is such that, unfortunately, all that this produces is a lot of people with needs and, suddenly, very few with any abilities.

In the world of diving there have been many instances where good people have tried to proclaim the answers to safe and happy diving in a few simple rules. Some of these have merit, "Always come up slowly" springs to mind as a rule that is hard to argue with. However many of the so called Golden Rules are really only superficially correct and ignore human nature. Sometimes the rules provide answers, but to the wrong questions. Let me explain.

There is a rule that is a relatively recent addition to dive safety manuals that goes:-

If you are doing a series of dives in a day you should make the deepest dive first, followed by successively shallower dives.

The corollary covers the conduct of an individual dive:-

If you are making a multi-level dive you should go to the deepest part of the dive first, and then continue to progressively shallower depths.

The reason for this rule is that such conduct produces less nitrogen loading, and therefore reduces the likelihood of decompression sickness.

BUT this marvellous rule presupposes that the question is "I am about to make several dives to various depths in the same day. In which order should I make the dives." With this question the answer is clear - follow the rule!

NOW let us ask a different question and introduce human nature into the equation.

I am going to dive a famous wreck this afternoon at a depth of 30 metres. In the morning we can dive at a reef site. How deep should I dive on the reef?

This is a very real situation as sometimes it is just not possible to reach a particular site in the morning. Don't you just love the question? I suggest you try it on your Dive Master or even better the local Queensland Diving Inspector. What they are going to tell you, I bet, is that the first dive should be deeper than the second, they will follow the rule, when it is obvious that it would be much safer if you only went to 10 m on the first dive.

Of course they could ban the morning dive, and risk mutiny, but what is actually happening in circumstances such as this is that divers are making deep bounce dives, to say 35 m, just so they will be able to dive to 30 m in the afternoon, when they would have been quite happy making a dive to only 10 m. In fact they will make an immediate ascent from 35 m and spend the rest of the dive at 10 m anyway. The important thing is to have 35 m on the computer for the dive master to let you make the afternoon dive to 30 m. Human nature, I love it.

The stupidity of blindly following rules was brought home to me when I was severely criticised because I started one day with a marvellous early morning dive at an anchorage in 2 m of water. My fellow divers insisted, admittedly tongue in mouthpiece, that the rest of the day's dives were to be shallower.

Those of you into live-aboard diving know that when you are really DIVING your computer rarely clears before your next morning's dive. This means that the rule should actually not be limited to only one day. If the dive master is being really conscientious he would insist that, in that circumstance, the first dive of the new day must not be deeper than the last dive of the previous day, and that the computer

must clear before you can go deeper. I just throw this in because it is the logical result of applying the rule absolutely. I admit I have never heard of this actually happening. Perhaps you have, if so I would love to hear from you by e-mail (halstead@internetnorth.com.au)

So to see if the answer is appropriate perhaps we should pay more attention to the question. How about these:-

- 1 Will the person I am about to buddy with increase or decrease the risk of the dive I am about to make?
- 2 If my buddy stays on board the boat while I dive, will I be less likely to be left behind by the boat?
- 3 If I choose to dive only in ideal conditions am I likely to see large pelagics such as Hammerhead Sharks?
- 4 If I wear a large BCD with all the bells and whistles, will I still be able to swim through the water?
- 5 If I do not log my sex life, why should I log my dive life?
- 6 Should I carry my own emergency air supply or let my buddy carry it for me? (As in, should I carry my own spare parachute or let my fellow jumper carry it for me?)

Just a few examples, if you have any of your own please e-mail me and I will publish them with credits.

So in diving, as in life, rules do not replace thinking.

Having published this story I was pleased to receive an e-mail from Stephen Bilson (See Letters to the Editor, page 135). The horror story he tells does demonstrate how important it is to select a good operator for your dive holiday. The bounce diving phenomena has been partly caused by over-zealous application of the deepest dive first rule by at least one of the Queensland Workplace Diving Inspectors, yet again demonstrating how Workplace contributes just as much to decreasing dive safety as it does to improving it. Other contributors to this nonsense are inexperienced divemasters, and operators who do not have standard procedures in place to guide their divemasters.

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ARE YOU AN ACCIDENT WAITING TO HAPPEN?

Breezing off to sea in the first warm days of early summer may be a wonderful release, but if your boat has languished unchecked in the garden since last year, it may prove to be a release from this earthly life! Here are our tips for surviving the new season.

Spring has sprung and every week-end you will see cars heading coastward, trailing just about anything that might float.

Many of these towed vessels have stood idle in gardens, garages and driveways since the previous summer and it comes as no surprise to hear how many come to grief almost as soon as they reach the water. It is a busy time for the coastguard and lifeboat services, and, it is sad to say that, with a little forethought, most of the disasters and near-misses could easily have been avoided.

Many people are prepared to head out to sea in inappropriate weather and aboard unsuitable vessels. Even on a hot day, the sea can be an inhospitable place, and many seagoers are ill-prepared for their adventures.

The first thing to look at is yourself. Are you ready to go to sea? Has your body been idle all winter like so many of those driveway inflatables? Do you get out of breath running for a bus and does your figure reflect a winter of too many pints and chip butties? Maybe you should think about getting into shape!

Divers distinguish themselves by actually exchanging the relative safety of boats for the hazards of swimming in cold and often fast moving water. Add to that the pressures of gas absorption plus the vagaries of sometimes out-of-practice diving techniques and you have a formidable combination.

So, have you done some swimming and some work-up dives in relatively easy conditions, or do you intend to make your first dive of the season in a fast tidal flow at 30 m on a wreck like the Kyarra, off Swanage (a very popular Bank Holiday Monday site)?

Health and fitness should be a number one priority, combined with conditions chosen to be less than daunting at this early time of year. Then there is the question of knowing your own limitations. Be really sure of what you are doing and don't be dragged along by the possibly reckless enthusiasm of your companions.

You should be certain that you have sufficient knowledge to be able to make sound decisions about your diving. People can be full of bravado sitting on a deck in the sunshine. I remember once being almost persuaded by my buddy to discard my lamp before diving a wreck. He

put himself forward as a real expert while on board, but became a very frightened (lampless) diver under water.

Are you going to make sure that you have got slack water when you dive, and will you know the actual site depth? Do you know how to calculate these things or are you going to rely on someone else, possibly to make mistakes on your behalf?

Equipment can let you down. Regulators should be serviced every winter and tried out in your branch pool before committing yourself to the sea. A regulator that has just been serviced can be perfect in the dive store but go into free flow once it smells the sea air.

Even simple equipment failures can ruin your dive and possibly turn pleasure into panic if you are not prepared. A mask that was perfect when you put it away last October can develop a leak where the lenses meet the frame, which only manifests itself under the pressure of depth. Are you able to cope with a mask that perpetually floods with cold water?

Drysuits should be checked for deterioration, too. A small leak may make your dive cold and miserable, but a dump-valve which pulls off in your hand can turn a comfortable drysuit into a sea anchor. You should be sure that all of your equipment is up to the job. Boats are notorious for letting you down and, unlike cars, you cannot walk off somewhere for help. Boats never break down while they are safe at home on their trailers.

The most common cause of engine failure is a worn water pump. It is a part that is easily replaced and should be done routinely.

An uncooled engine quickly becomes a dead engine. Engines should always have enjoyed proper winterising prior to storage but also need a good inspection before setting off for that distant wreck.

Even the tubes of your RIB (rigid inflatable boat) should be thoroughly checked, inside and out. I know of one club that discovered their boat had become a single chamber vessel, due to internal baffle failures, only after they punctured a part of the tube out at sea. It was a very touch-and-go situation with a safe return to shore made possible only by flat, calm water.

Once, as the guest of a local branch, I sat bemused as we wallowed without power, listening to a violent inquiry as to who was responsible for fuelling the empty petrol tanks!

With the advent of electronics, we have come to rely on modern navigational aids. But even electronics sometimes go wrong. Do you know how to get home when the silicon chips are down?

And do you know how to use your equipment properly? I heard of one club outing which distinguished itself by setting off with a new GPS without entering their point of departure. Safety equipment is often ignored until it is needed. In the event of problems, will it all function? Does your radio work and will more than one of you know how to use it? Will you make a radio check with the coastguard?

Flares lie idle and can be unreliable. Replace your smoke and parachute flares before they go out of date and dispose of the old ones in a safe manner.

Do you have a fire extinguisher on board, and is it likely to function properly if you need it in a hurry? The same can be asked of your first-aid kit. It is almost bound to have been plundered in the past and some essentials will need replacing. Are you up to date with first aid techniques?

Finally, it is useful to brush up on your diving skills before heading for the sea. BSAC training has a strong bias towards teaching every diver what to do in an emergency, but because emergencies thankfully seldom arise we can all get rusty. Branch nights and trips to inland sites should not only be used to teach rescue techniques to novices but also to keep one's own skills honed. One of the best ways to keep on top of a practical subject is to teach it to others.

Should the unthinkable happen and a diver become lost or reach the surface in a serious condition, do you know how to react? Do not leave it to others. Enjoy your diving in the knowledge that you have hoped for the best, but planned for the worst!

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The above was written for UK divers but it applies equally well to Australians and New Zealanders looking forward to the end of winter. It also applies, in part, to those SPUMS members, who, like the Editor, have become regular, one-warm-water-trip-a-year, divers. Elderly electronic devices can fail underwater without warning, as did the Editor's very early model all-in-one depth gauge, bottom timer and contents gauge, cutting short a lovely dive.