

ARE WOMEN A DIFFERENT BREED OF DIVERS?

by Susan C Brickson

ABSTRACT

Women make better divers both physically and emotionally than men. Why are there no more women divers? There are problems, unique to women, that they have to overcome to eventually feel comfortable in scuba. By understanding and becoming aware of these, instructors can use them to the students' best advantage.

Women are better divers than men! We have all heard this statement, but do you believe it? Several facts support it. The average woman breathes between 0.6 and 0.9 cubic feet per minute (cfm) at the surface while the average man uses in excess of 1.0 cfm. The layer of subcutaneous adipose tissue not only insulates her efficiently but increases her buoyancy. Are these reasons really important for making women better divers. I say no. Women have calmer nerves, perform more efficiently under stress, and are more cautious. These go together in making them better divers. Since women are both physiologically and emotionally well suited for diving, why do they comprise only 20% of all divers certified by NAUI?

For years scuba diving has been male dominated. Diving used to be visualized as macho, difficult and exhausting. As the image of diving changes to one of fun and excitement, more and more women are coming into classes to learn to dive. Some have a preconceived notion of what recreational diving is all about. For the most part these students also will be easy to teach because they want to learn. Others are brought into the sport by personal pressures. These unfortunately are much harder to teach because they are not entering into sport with free minds. The fact that they all agree to take a scuba course suggests that the instructor can influence their ultimate enjoyment of diving. In order to best support woman as divers we must appreciate their reasons for getting into diving, the problems they perceive as students, and finally the realities they face after they are certified.

I wish that I could say that all woman go into diving for their own personal satisfaction. Unfortunately, this is too often not the case. One of the of the most prevalent reasons for a woman taking a scuba course is that her spouse/boyfriend/lover "pushes" her into it. Frequently the "push" is subtle, being left at home or on the beach once too often. Sometimes, constant nagging on the part of the male member of the pair causes her to agree to dive to shut him up. In either case, their motivation is not sufficient to allow for an easy transition from an uncomfortable novice to a competent diver visiting the aquatic environment on a regular basis. These are the women we frequently get as students, and with whom we must work, in order to increase their self motivation and ease their transition. The instructors most successful at this have learned to treat women as individuals while still being sensitive to their particular reasons for diving.

One big problem that many women have, that they cannot do much about, is their size. These pint sized divers are trying to manage equipment that is much too large. This is frustrating enough for the women that are strong and are not having problems. Think how it is for the ones that are just a little nervous and any minor hassle is a major issue.

Would you put on a wetsuit that fit your arms but was a half size too large in the chest? Would you put on a back-pack that did not fit the contour of your back? How about a tank that constantly hits you in the back of your knees? Of course not, and yet this is what the diving equipment manufacturers are asking women to do.

How many of you have ever met a women who looks like the wet suits we see hanging in the shops. A 44" bustline matched to a 5'3" body? It would be much more reasonable if the wetsuits were built to more realistically reflect the size and shape of today's women.

We all realize that getting into a wetsuit can be a struggle. It becomes real work when your hips are 10 inches larger than your waist. A simple zipper in the side of a pair of Farmer Johns readily solves this particular problem.

Put any standard buoyancy compensator on most women and it hangs down below her waist. How can they be comfortable when their BC takes up half their body length and sticks way out on either side of their bodies. Several manufacturers have come out with "shortie" BC's and these prove to be satisfactory if they are used.

Below the BC is that plethora of buckles - BC, backpack, and weight belt. In an area that usually will take only one buckle, we put all three. There are several solutions to this problem. Back BC systems incorporating weights solve this dilemma, but introduces a new set of difficulties, mainly in the back, when the woman is out of the water. Smaller webbing with half sized buckles or velcro closures might prove very effective at uncluttering the woman's midsection.

These are some of the equipment hassles that the women entering diving must face. The instructor must be aware that many apparent skill problems may just be simply manifestations of poorly fitting gear. These will largely disappear when the members of DEMA recognise the purchasing power of women divers and manufacture gear suited to their needs.

Other than the gear, women have a few more strikes against them when they decide to go into diving. This is their physiological makeup. Women have been raised in an emotional environment which enhances sensitivity and suppresses competition. This is, in large, the opposite of the cultural training a man receives. Recognizing this, is it fair for us to "hurry to the dive site", to "rush getting geared up", or to introduce "competitive games" into our training programs?

Almost anyone finding themselves competing in diving and not doing so well will feel put down. Repeated frustrations of this type go a long way in causing women to drop out of diving before they ever really get into it. Games that are non-competitive or that put "teams" against one another in fun are both enjoyable and enhance learning. The games that have a "winner" or that have some degree of failure are detrimental to the sport. Diving is noncompetitive. It is a sharing sport with each person sharing their experiences with the other.

As instructors we make a firm commitment to teach to the needs of our students. We must recognize that each person is an individual and treat them accordingly. Along with this it must be recognized that the women in our classes have their own unique problems with gear, with their buddies, and with themselves. We are dealing with a special group of people, that, if we let them, will help revolutionize the sport into one that is truly exciting, sensual, and fun for everyone.