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DIVER



DIVER'S 'ALL-4-ONE' DEAL | U/W SCULPTURE | AMAZON | RUSSIAN CAVE | CRESSI GIOTTO

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Dive Training Today A Perspective

An industry and training veteran says a poorly trained diver is a dropout statistic waiting to happen. Are you one of them? Do you agree?

TEXT BY BRET GILLIAM

Diving is a sport that is complicated. Not adversely so... but just like snow skiing, hang gliding and spelunking, there are prerequisites to be met, skills to master and experience to be acquired in order to participate with an acceptable degree of risk. Notice that I said, 'risk', not 'safety'. Because active outdoor sports are not safe. There are hazards and the potential exists for injury and even death. Training and real practical experience mitigate those risks. To be capable, divers need to comprehend subjects like embolism and decompression sickness. This isn't bowling or golf. Divers need to fully be aware of and appreciate exactly these realities when they decide to strap on SCUBA gear and take the plunge.

Are today's certification programs meeting the challenge of preparing divers? It's a complicated discussion and my analysis is probably not going to be warmly received by some parties. So here we go...

There are many things that modern dive training does far better than when I was certified in 1959. By orders of magnitude equipment has advanced in design, efficiency, safety and ergonomics. Training

texts are superior, whether in print or electronic form as part of online home study training courses that are now commonplace. Retail stores, dive boats and beach access in most locations have all evolved into better environments for learning and those initial open water experiences. And directly supervised checkout dives now number at least four, up from just one years ago. So what's the problem?

Adverse Reaction

As much as things improved in some areas, the circumstances of a changing industry, economic pressures and a shrinking market prompted other 'evolutions' that began a slow slide adversely affecting diver competency and retention in the sport. As late as the 1980s, most diving instruction tended to start locally and was nurtured by dive retailers who conducted academic, pool, and 'open water' dives usually within a fairly tight radius of their home region. But as local conditions deteriorated and new divers were turned off by cold water, beach surf, a lack of interesting marine life and limited visibility, a new trend emerged. Initial training was still done locally, but then divers were referred to warm water regions to complete their



Quality training produces quality divers. Instructors are role models for impressionable new SCUBA enthusiasts, playing a pivotal role in the growth of the sport



underwater education. This shift was grounded in solid logic: it was more fun. Where would you rather do your first ocean dives: off the beach in northern California, in chilly New England, in a murky lake or sinkhole in the Midwest or some place with more appeal? How about the Florida Keys, the Bahamas or the Caribbean, in a warm, clear, calm environment with all the added perks of a nice vacation? This was a far more stimulating atmosphere.

Soon a symbiotic relationship developed between local training centers and resorts. Students enjoyed a smoother open water transition; they established a dive vacation pattern for activities, bought more equipment and tended to stay in the sport as active participants. The model was an all around win/win ... at the outset. Now over two and half decades later, things have changed and some reassessment is in order.

First of all, I think it's fine that divers complete their ocean training in a warm and exotic resort location as long as they thoroughly understand that such environments are easier, more forgiving and far less demanding than the more challenging conditions that await them back home. They must be very clear that a few dives in Nassau or Grand Cayman afford a qualified certification to dive in that type of benign ocean where it's 82°F (28°C), visibility can be 100 feet (30m) and where little or no current and relatively placid sea conditions invite casual diving with little stress. In this scenario a diver's age and physical fitness level are less of an issue. And this is okay provided divers are fully informed of what their limitations should be.

But in many cases they are not so informed. I am actively involved in operations, consulting for scores of diving industry clients worldwide. My work includes specific risk management advisories for protocols. Also, I am hired as an expert witness in lawsuits (almost equally for the plaintiff and defense) that give me insider access to all the facts and details of accident analysis that are rarely disclosed when cases settle without a trial verdict. This involvement has given me a unique perspective on dive training and qualifications for everyday participants as well as the instructors and divemasters that teach the programs and conduct the dives. Here are a few objective observations firmly rooted in reality:

Matters of Concern

1 Some scuba training agency programs lead divers to believe they are more qualified than they are, with ratings such as 'Advanced Diver' requiring as few as 9 to 10 total dives; and 'Master Diver' requiring fewer than 25 dives. Some 'Rescue' courses are so simplistic as to be largely impractical in actual emergencies. There are numerous other examples.

2 Divers can qualify for instructor ratings with as few as 40 dives in some agencies.

3 No effective attempt is made within some agencies to interdict and restrict instructors who consistently breach standards that lead to unacceptable accident records.

4 Courses tend to be abbreviated for the sake of 'moving the student' through the system instead of ensuring that skills and knowledge are fully learned and mastered. One agency claimed to use a 'performance based' standard of qualification but in one lawsuit's discovery disclosures that premise was proved to be totally misstated. For example, if a student was asked to clear a mask two dozen times and finally got it right on the 24th time, he was passed despite the fact he/she did not demonstrate the ability to repeat and master the skill. In fact, the student had successfully cleared his mask just once! This hardly meets any meaningful competency standard demonstrating the student can successfully repeat the task and

is confident, regardless of multiple certification cards in his wallet or patches on his windbreaker.

5 Students need the opportunity to make mistakes under direct supervision of an instructor who turns the process into a positive learning experience in a controlled environment, rather than a mistake becoming a lesson in survival when it occurs in open water without experienced help at hand.

6 Historically, the number of divers entering the sport has been vastly overstated for marketing purposes. Recent Diving Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA) census reporting has confirmed this. When the database of divers is not accurate,

it skews the ratio of participants' accident incident rates and makes forecasting risk predictability and actuarial insurance ratings impossible to determine and assess.

7 Additionally, the dropout rate for divers and instructors is at an historic high. This is particularly significant for instructor and other leadership level ratings, as it then tends to replace existing professionals with those even less qualified. This is due mostly to employment conditions and lack of financial compensation. Although touted as a career path by many agencies, the majority of instructors find that they lack the means to obtain a position that will pay them a living wage unless their ratings are supplemented with



“Are you an advanced diver with only nine dives? C'mon, we all know the answer to that”

legitimate extra credentials such as EMS training, maritime licenses or specific expertise in such fields as photography and videography to supplement their value in a retail, resort or live-aboard position.

8 Since participation in diving has experienced a dramatic decline over the past decade, there has been a corresponding decline in experienced mentors for new instructors and divemasters for on-the-job or in-the-field real world training. One outcome is declining effectiveness in the early identification of behavior patterns that more experienced dive supervisors would notice and correct. Another outcome is increased accidents.

9 A review of lawsuits and accident reporting suggest accidents, increasingly, result from a simple lack of common sense, from a lack of situational awareness, maritime experience, etc., since little of this specific training and assessment is incorporated into many agency instructor curricula.

10 There is also a need for enhanced training in evacuation, field assessment and treatment. Perhaps most importantly there's a need to disqualify inexperienced divers from activities in challenging conditions. To illustrate, an issue of Undercurrent magazine reported the celebration of a diver's 25th logged dive from a live-aboard vessel at Cocos Island, a site best suited for advanced divers with the ability to dive independently. How such a diver was even accepted as a customer defies all prudent logic.

11 Finally, while most training agencies do a credible job of developing worthy standards and procedures for training, many resorts and dive live-aboards lack even rudimentary operations manuals that address varied field condition protocols. These would be for more advanced medical assessment, search and rescue and adequate evacuation methods. As well they would cover procedures for on-site treatment of decompression sickness with adequate oxygen and delivery equipment, along with in-water treatment table procedures and sufficient supplies of oxygen with demand masks for surface breathing first aid.



Skill drill. Becoming proficient and comfortable in the water are key objectives of good SCUBA training in pool sessions and during open water checkout dives

Consumer Convenience

Whew... that's a lot to digest. Emerging gradually over the years, these concerns have been brought on by a litany of factors, not least economic strain and, for some, financial desperation. As more people drop out of the sport, local dive retailers lose sales of both equipment and travel and fewer people opt for diving as a job since the pay isn't sufficient compared to alternatives. As noted above, all these elements then collide as the industry struggles to sustain its business model.

Another major factor, the proverbial 'elephant in the room', is the increase in online equipment sales at the expense of the local dive retailer. This trend seriously threatens the survival of traditional dive stores and we're seeing shops close at an alarming rate. This is particularly harmful to dive training since these facilities are the primary source of certification programs that bring new folks into the sport and foster their continued interest.

Recently, another trend has hurt dive stores: the practice of resorts and live-aboard vessels providing full equipment packages, including dive computers, regulators, BCDs, wet suits, etc., at nominal rental rates or at no charge for week long bookings.

You can't blame them. This is what the consumer has asked for in an age of absurd airline baggage fees and the flat out convenience of having all you need made available at your dive location. It's no muss, no fuss travel. The same model has served ski resorts for decades. Only the most committed skiers buy equipment. Nowadays they prefer to organize their gear on arrival at the mountain. Many industry professionals argue that this practice works to retain participation by offering a wide selection of state-of-the-art gear without a big financial outlay and by stimulating travel, perhaps the most effective way to keep the diver or the skier active. But try telling that to a local retail store.

Basic Realities

I am deeply concerned about the dumbing down of dive training on all levels. Of course, the impetus originates with some agencies that see the strategy enrolling and graduating more students. But, it seems, they miss the point about customer retention. People that are not fully competent are not confident. When turned loose with a pocketful of certifications and questionable specialties many quickly learn that their advanced or master diver status doesn't help them in a strong current,

Students need the opportunity to make mistakes under direct supervision of an instructor, so a mistake doesn't later become a survival lesson in open water

surge, reduced visibility or other stressful situation. Before you know it, they drop out and choose another sport like tennis. Once gone, they aren't coming back.

The dive industry and the consumer/diver must grasp some very basic realities, key among them the firm understanding and importance of initial training as the acorn that grows into the lasting oak tree, the active diving participant. Agencies need to upgrade requirements for instructor/divemaster qualifications to ensure that true professionals are the result. These knowledgeable people will pass on their training and by their example build the strong force of professionals needed in the sport. Concurrently, changes are needed at the entry level where more supervised training is essential for newcomers to sport diving. This means more dives and longer bottom times. Let's do away with four dives, as short as 15 minutes each, in return for a C-card that says you're

The dropout rate for divers and instructors is at an historic high. Good training alone can turn that tide

a qualified diver. Agencies also need to de-emphasize the collection of specialty certifications that serve only to confuse new divers with respect to their actual competency and skill level. Are you an advanced diver, with only nine dives? C'mon, we all know the answer to that. Are you an advanced skier with nine runs down the mountain, most of them on the bunny slope or easy trails? You're not advanced at anything with only nine experiences whether it's diving, driving, in photography or golf. The industry would benefit greatly by producing a more complete training package that truly qualifies people with the skills and confidence that keeps them in the sport.

Sometimes I'm hopeful, and sometimes I'm not. A recent change by one training agency now allows divers to do their 'open water' dives in an aquarium. Yes, you read that correctly, in an aquarium! No current, no surge, temperate water, perfect visibility, no stressor whatsoever. There is no requirement for a dive in the ocean, a lake, or even a muddy pond. Do you really think this will prepare those divers to dive on their own? Call me crazy, but I'm skeptical.

There are some bright spots. Diving technology and equipment has never been better. The

emergence of reliable efficient rebreather models is one exciting development, which you can read about elsewhere in this issue. This apparatus may play an important role in the sport's growth in the years to come but it goes without saying that proper training is critically important for those interested in using this more complex apparatus. Rebreathers could serve as the stimulus, at all levels of participation, particularly among young people who yearn for the latest tech advance and stand in line overnight just to buy the latest smart phone.

I can't offer a solution to Internet sales. And I can't arrest or reverse the effects that warmer temperatures, pollution and other phenomena continue to have deteriorating the ocean environment. Diving is still a vibrant and exciting experience that is a great family recreation, and that's key to the long-term health of the sport. Yeah, the reefs and marine life are not what they were when I started diving, but I still love it. For those just now experiencing the wonder of seeing a dolphin or a turtle that gives them a hello for the first time, it's a thrill they will remember forever.

So let's give them the tools and training they need to become competent, confident and

Let's give them the tools and training they need to become competent, confident and independent divers who will enjoy the sport throughout their lives

independent divers who will enjoy the sport throughout their lives.

As I have often been quoted saying, 'safety is good business', but I'm concerned by what I see and hope that these issues won't come back to haunt the current generation of diving. Still, there's time to make the adjustments and get the ship back on course. The industry needs to embrace proactive change. That starts with meaningful reform to training models that have gone askew. The best diving customer is an active diver, not one who dropped out when his qualifications proved less than real. Reality...it's a bitch. []

Bret Gilliam is a 42-year veteran of the diving industry with involvement in retail stores, resorts, live-aboards, cruise ships, manufacturing, publishing and hyperbaric medicine. He founded the training agencies TDI, SDI and ERDI and also served as the Chairman of the Board for NAUI in the early 1990s. He's logged over 18,000 dives in his career and continues to travel internationally on diving projects.

Photo: Trisha Stovel

Photo: Russell Clark