

The Underwater Photographers Code of Conduct



Most underwater photographers are concerned to protect the environment in which they take their pictures and to avoid stressing marine creatures when they are taking their images. This is good for the marine environment and leads to better photographs.

This Code sets out good practices for anyone who aspires to take pictures or video underwater. Many aspects are also applicable to the general sports diver.

No-one should attempt to take pictures underwater until they are a competent diver. Novices thrashing about with their hands and fins while conscious only of the image in their viewfinder can do untold damage.



Every diver, including photographers, should ensure that gauges, octopus regulators, torches and other equipment are secured so they do not trail over reefs or cause other damage.

Underwater photographers should possess superior precision buoyancy control skills to avoid damaging the fragile marine environment and its creatures. Even experienced divers and those modelling for photographers should ensure that careless or excessively vigorous fin strokes and arm movements do not damage coral or smother it in clouds of sand.

A finger placed carefully on a bare patch of rock can do much to replace other, more damaging movement.



Photographers should carefully explore the area in which they are diving and find subjects that are accessible without damage to them or other organisms.

Care should be taken to avoid stressing a subject. Some fish are clearly unhappy when a camera invades their 'personal space' or when pictures are taken using flash or lights. Others are unconcerned. They make the best subjects.



Divers and photographers should never kill marine life to attract other types to them or to create a photographic opportunity, such as feeding sea urchins to wrasse. Creatures should never be handled or irritated to create a reaction and sedentary ones should never be placed on an alien background, which may result in them being killed.

Queuing to photograph a rare subject, such as a seahorse, should be avoided because of the harm repeated bursts of bright light may do to their eyesight. For the same reason, the number of shots of an individual subject should be kept to the minimum.





Clown fish and other territorial animals are popular subjects but some become highly stressed when a photographer moves in to take a picture. If a subject exhibits abnormal behaviour, move on to find another.

Night diving requires exceptional care because it is much more difficult to be aware of your surroundings. Strong torch beams or lights can dazzle fish and cause them to harm themselves by blundering into surrounding coral or rocks. Others are confused and disturbed if torch beams or lights are pointed directly at them. Be prepared to keep bright lights off subjects that exhibit stressed behaviour, using only the edge of the beam to minimise disturbance.



Care should be taken when photographing in caves, caverns or even inside wrecks because exhaust bubbles can become trapped under overhangs killing marine life. Even small pockets of trapped air which allow divers to talk to each other inside them can be lethal for marine life.

The image in the viewfinder can be very compelling. Photographers should remain conscious of their position and of the marine life around them at all times. In sensitive areas, they should avoid moving around on the bottom with their mask pressed up against the camera viewfinder.



Areas of extensive damage or pollution should be reported to the appropriate authorities.

Today, when so many more divers are taking up underwater photography, both still and video, it is essential that the preservation of the fragile marine environment and its creatures is paramount and that this Code of Good Practice is carefully observed.



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This Code of Good Practice has been introduced by the Marine Conservation Society with funding from Project AWARE (UK), the Marine Wildlife Photo Agency, Ocean Optics, the Northern Underwater Photography Group and Menai Sub-Aqua Club.

It is endorsed by the British Society of Underwater Photographers, the Northern Underwater Photography Group and the Bristol Underwater Photography Group. It is also being supported by the Sub-Aqua Association, the British Sub-Aqua Club and the Scottish Sub-Aqua Club. For further copies of the Code please contact MCS on 01989 566017 or www.mcsuk.org



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