own habitual long-legged finning technique than with whiskers and I felt I could take on the most powerful of head-on currents. However, that was not without some cost in the form of some strain on my ankles.

Excellerating Force Fins

I canvassed a few other opinions. Simon Gardener, a dive guide on the Peter Hughes vessel *MV Royal Evolution* in the Sudan and an avid Force Pro fin fan, confirmed this when he tried them. The other dive-guide, Hesham Ayyad, thought they felt very powerful but were uncomfortable. Fellow passenger Hugo Cariss, a commercial director from New York, said he could feel how effective they were but still didn't like using them at first – until he got used to them, that is. He said later that they were a bit like surgically enhanced breasts in that they didn't look quite right and felt very strange but in the end he appreciated that they would do the job nicely. After a number of dives, he thought they were very good indeed. It seems they grow on you. Another passenger, Margreet Verberg from Holland, liked them very much though they were too big for her rather small feet. Everyone agreed they really came into their own once they were in a head-on current.

Obviously, you need to get used to them. When all is said and done, it's how a fin performs on the end of your leg that counts. It's obvious they will not be to everyone's taste, but own a pair of these fins and your pals will be envious enough to hate you, simply because of the money you've spent! (They're listed on Force Fin's Web site for a ridiculous $629 but can be found elsewhere for nearly half that price, which is still a bundle.)

I came to the conclusion that unlike the more commonly encountered Force Fin Pro fins, which take little effort for those able to deliver a consistently fast flutter kick, the Excellerating Force Fins with "batwings" suited those of us with strength in the legs to take advantage of their huge water shifting ability. The same fins with "whiskers" proved slightly less effective, but the innovative Foil Force and Force OPS fins, although making wonderful conversation pieces, fail to deliver the performance in the water I really expected from them.

John Bantin is the Technical Editor for DIVER *magazine in the United Kingdom and a professional underwater photographer.*

Those Guides Who Manhandle Fish

and why we should avoid them

Undercurrent reader Don Wilson (Caldwell, NJ) was diving with a friend who owned a dive operation on Hawaii's Kona coast, when the latter caught an octopus and held it. The hapless animal depleted its ink reserve. "When my friend finally released the octopus, it darted toward cover, but too late. A fish shot from the sidelines, grabbed the doomed octopus and hauled it away."

Maybe it was the octopus's destiny to become dinner for a fish, but it probably would have had a longer lifespan if a human hadn't played such a part in its death. Wilson hollered at his friend, but what do the rest of us divers do when on trips with dive operators who have no qualms about handling marine life?

Obviously, divers want to dive with lots of fish and interesting marine life all around them. Knowing this, dive businesses do what they can to guarantee that happens, from offering shark feeds to holding creatures up close. They mean well, but they are also changing animals' natural behavior, modifying their eating habits, and making them more fearful or more aggressive. Can dive operators and divers find a happy balance between seeing lots of fish and letting them be?

"Pretty Much Everyone Here Does It"

It's not an even balance in some popular dive destinations. In our travel story about San Pedro, Belize, in this issue, our writer described how divemasters from Amigos Del Mar grabbed nurse sharks to let divers rub their bellies, and pulled lobsters and crabs out from under rocks to let underwater photographers get better shots. Turns out they're not the only one.s Many *Undercurrent* readers told us about similar experiences while diving with San Pedro dive operators, who seem to delight in manhandling critters.

Subscriber Stu Mapes dived with the Ramon's Village dive operation last fall and was appalled to see divemasters riding nurse sharks, chasing and sometimes catching sea turtles, picking up and passing around various creatures, and handling

coral. "One of the first things stressed to me when I certified was to look, not touch, and I've found most divers follow that advice," he says. "However, in Belize it seems to be the norm."

> ***"I'd rather photograph fish acting naturally instead of being held in someone's hands."***

Rick Sutherland, the dive shop manager at Ramon's, denies that happens and told *Undercurrent* that he tells divemasters not to touch anything. "I don't want people doing that kind of thing in my home, so why should we do that in theirs?" He says Ramon's is not an operation that throws out chum in the Blue Hole, and that boats only feed fish at two Ambergris Caye dive sites, Shark Ray Alley and Esmerelda.

Amigos Del Mar confesses to handling fish and feeding shark and grouper, and manager Gilmar Paz is very blasé about it. "I know it's controversial for the environmentalists but most of our divers like it because the marine life comes to them." He says Amigos Del Mar has no official fish-touching policy, nor is any mention made in dive briefing. "We leave it up to the divemasters to decide what to do, and we do tell divers that if they don't like what's happening, then tell us so. We try to please everyone. But pretty much every dive operator here does it."

He's probably right, as *Undercurrent* readers wrote of similar experiences at Ambergris Divers and Patojo's Dive Center. However, in our Belize story our writer gave Aqua Dives divemasters on the Blue Hole day trip thumbs up for not touching marine life.

"It's Hard to Play Scuba Cop"

Subscriber Susan Goudge (Lake Zurich, IL) had an octopus experience similar to Don Brown's while diving with Kauai's Seasport Divers on a trip to Niihau. "Our divemaster Luke took an octopus from its crevice and held his hand up so that each time the octopus tried to escape, it swam into Luke's palm. There was ink everywhere, and a great photo op of an octopus with tentacles extended, but it seemed more like a bully-in-the-playground situation."

Seasport owner Marvin Otsuji told us he has heard that complaint often but says he can't do much. "I can't be there on a day-to-day basis. We don't have an official policy about touching, but I do tell the crew to be 100 percent professional." He says divers can sometimes be the problem as many are overeager and do similar grabs. "We try to say don't touch as best we can, but we can't constantly tell people not to without making them upset."

It's a copout for businesses to say they don't have a policy and can't control their employees. Having no policy about pulling critters from crevices means that it's ok to do it. And it's another copout to place blame on divers and make employees solely responsible when many are failing to set good examples of marine life interaction.

While diving with Cozumel's Dive Paradise last spring, subscriber Deborah Brown was one of the few divers with a camera, so a divemaster decided to find her photo subjects. "He managed to find a splendid toadfish tucked under coral, as is customary. I was ecstatic because Cozumel is the only place to find it, so I quickly moved in to snap some shots." But then the divemaster took a stick and started prodding at the fish, using his other hand to pull it from its hideout so Brown could get a better shot. "I was so irritated that he would go to such lengths that I quickly turned and swam away in hopes he would leave the fish alone. To me, no picture is worth harming the subject. I'd much rather have a shot of a fish acting naturally, even if that means I'll only get to see part of its body, rather than being held captive in someone's hands."

When *Undercurrent* told Dive Paradise owner Renee Applegate about the incident, she was very upset. "He shouldn't have done that, and all the divemasters here know they're not supposed to do that. It's in the briefing for divers. We dive in a marine park and the rules are supposed to be observed."

> ***"Anything you do to make a fish change direction is something you shouldn't do."***

You can't always blame the operator for the actions of one grabby divemaster or diver. But those who see harm being done should speak up and tell the manager who, at the least, should pull aside the offender for an explanation. Subscriber David DeBoer (Dallas, TX) took it further and left after two days of a scheduled dive week with Scuba Mex, south of Cancun. "Both owners and divemasters would bother anything to provide interest for the divers. The grabbing of pufferfish to induce defensive inflation was a favorite. Latching onto turtles and yanking lobsters out of crevices by their antennae were other specialties. It makes no difference whether it's your neighbor's cat or a marine invertebrate, it's animal cruelty." Scuba Mex did not reply to our calls or e-mails.

Marta Arensberg (Issaquah, WA) was diving last September on the *Palau Aggressor* when she noticed two divers taking underwater photos of a small turtle. They had pinned it against a wall, allowing it no escape. "They kept their lenses less than 18 inches from this little guy for over five minutes, so I motioned to one of the divemasters to stop them. He did nothing, just shrugged his shoulders at me."

When *Undercurrent* asked Wayne Hasson, president of the Aggressor fleet, about that episode, he replied that there was nothing the divemaster could have done just then. "You can't scold them in front of other people underwater. Who wants to create an embarrassing situation? It's better to take them aside and say, 'You've harassed turtles and upset divers; do it again and your diving privileges will be revoked.'"

Hasson says all Aggressor boat briefings state no touching, no feeding. "That doesn't change the fact that people still do. Some can't help themselves. What do you do?"

"There Is A Right Way to Touch Fish"

Many *Undercurrent* subscribers recommended dive operators who set good examples about not touching coral or disturbing animals. Susan Goudge says Smitty, formerly of Sea Eye Divers in Grand Turk who now has his own shop, keeps divers' encounters with animals as natural as possible. David DeBoer applauded Saba's Golden Rock Dive Center and Sea Saba for upholding the marine park's strict rules. Scott Okhuysen (Stephenson, MI) says Crystal Clear Watersports in the Florida Keys continually stressed the importance of being only observers. "On one dive, it was reported that a diver caught a ride on a turtle. The divemaster very nicely asked this person, who admitted it. Then he not so nicely explained that if the diver did this again, he would never dive with the operation again."

Many readers have raved about diving with Touch the Sea in Bonaire (www.touchthesea.com). Owner Dee Scarr takes four divers maximum, gives them 45-minute briefings and aims to get them close to anemones, octopuses and cleaner shrimp. Ed Stevens (Austin, TX) describes his memorable experience. "We entered the water a little before sunset under Town Pier and came across a shy octopus in her den. We sat on the bottom and waited quietly. Slowly, the octopus emerged from her cavern and approached me. I slowly put out my bare arm and the octopus, about three feet in diameter, gripped me and climbed up. Then came the unusual part – instead of continuing her climb, she started to tug on my arm and swim back toward her den. I slowly moved with her, not imagining what she was up to. Dee wrote on her whiteboard, 'She's taking you home!' This adorable octopus and I had to split up because I was running low on air. Did we do wrong by socializing with this wild creature? I certainly benefited. Did she?"

Yes, says Scarr. In her opinion, interacting can be done in ways that are educational and respect the animals. "The simplest way to look at it is the wording of the U.S. Marine Mammal Protection Act," she says. "Anything you do that makes a fish turn the opposite direction is something you shouldn't do."

Even venomous animals can be approached in the right way. Scorpionfish lying on the sea floor raise a dorsal fin to show discomfort. Scarr tries to find one lying low in flat sand so she doesn't approach it from above. "If it raises the dorsal fin, I back off. If it doesn't, I position my four divers in positions so that they're not making a semi-circle around it and the fish sees that if he wants to go, he can. You can't pen in anything or it will feel uncomfortable." Scarr reaches out a finger, then raises the dorsal fin a bit. If the scorpionfish hasn't moved, she brings divers in one by one to pet it in the safe spot behind the fin. "The goal is to make the fish comfortable."

It's apparent that too many dive operators let their divemasters manhandle marine life. Some operators encourage it while others turn their backs. Their goal is to entertain their customers, regardless of the effect on the natural environment. In most cases, they are threatening the security of the animal, forcing it into a defensive mode. Dee Scarr's approach is not only entertaining, it is also gentle and educational. Others should follow her lead. As it is now, reckless dive operators are another element in the destruction of our reefs and marine life. Divers ought to avoid them.

-- Vanessa Richardson

Next month, we'll take a look at fish feeding and the diving industry's overall stance on human interaction with marine life.

Dolphin Speak

A research project has distinguished nearly 200 different whistles that dolphins make, linking some of them to specific behaviors. Liz Hawkins of Southern Cross University in Lismore, Australia, has concluded that their communication is "highly complex and it is contextual, so in a sense, it could be termed a language," as she told the magazine *New Scientist.*

Hawkins recorded a total of 1,647 whistles from 51 different pods of dolphins living in Byron Bay, just south of Brisbane. She identified 186 different whistle types. Of these, 20 were especially common.

Dolphins use "signature" whistles to identify themselves to others and refer to each other in their whistles, something no other animals are known to do. But they are apparently saying much more. When a pod was traveling, for instance, 57 percent of the whistles were "sine" whistles, rising and falling symmetrically. But when the dolphins were feeding or resting, they made far fewer whistles of this type. And while socializing, they communicated almost exclusively using flat-toned or rising-toned whistles.

The dolphins often made a particular flat-toned whistle when they rode the waves created by Hawkins's boat, and it's tempting to speculate that the whistle is the equivalent of a child going "wheeee!" In a group of dolphins living off Queensland, Hawkins identified a whistle often emitted by an animal when it was on its own. "That whistle could definitely mean: 'I'm here, where is everyone?'" says Hawkins.

Melinda Rekdahl of the University of Queensland found dolphins make more whistles when they're being hand-fed than those feeding in the wild. "It's too early to know whether whistles might mean something as specific as 'hurry up' or 'there's food over here,'" she says. "But it's possible. Dolphin communication is much more complicated than we thought."

A review of the science of dolphin communication can be found at http://acp.eugraph.com.

Flotsam & Jetsam

Enter the Underwater Photo and Video Competition. March 1 is the deadline to enter the 11th Underwater Images Photo/Video Competition. Categories include "Conservation," "Macro," "Wide Angle," and a new one called "Divers and Marine Creatures." Best of Show and First Prize awards will be dive trips to Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and Indonesia, among others. Dive equipment and gift certificates from sponsors like Ikelite and Pinnacle will also be given out. Each submission has a $10 entry fee, and more than 80 percent of proceeds go to nonprofits supporting marine conservation. To enter the contest, visit www.uwimages.org.

How Diving Helps Business Owners. While running a dive shop in Tonga, Patty Vogel realized that what she knows about diving also applies to running a business. In an article for *Entrepreneur*, she summarized thus: 1) Never stop breathing -- using your breath as a natural stress reducer makes you a better leader; 2) Swimming with the current will make entrepreneurship easier and more enjoyable; and 3) Prepare for your next adventure by having the boat wait for you at the end of the dive.

The $23,000 Sharksuit. The Neptunic C Suit made from steel mesh, titanium and hybrid laminates can supposedly withstand shark bites but takes a big chunk from your wallet instead. The suit is a modern version of one tested by shark expert Valerie Taylor in the 1980s (hers, made of butchers' gloves, only cost $2,000). Neptunic creator Jeremiah Sullivan says he has had no injuries from thousands of shark bites while wearing it, but his Web site states, "We offer no guarantee about the usefulness of this product to protect a wearer from injury of any kind under any circumstances." See the sharksuit at www.neptunic.com.

Tail Shot. The most unique underwater photo placement we've seen is on the enormous tail of a Frontier Airlines Airbus. It's a turtle shot, one flap up, the other down, taken by subscriber Ken Howard (San Anselmo, CA)., Frontier offered him their standard $1,500 fee, which he found insulting but negotiated a substantially better deal. To see the Airbus turtle tail, go to www.seaimages.org. Frontier is currently looking for shots of adult seals and manatees. For information, email jchua@flyfrontier.com.

undercurrent

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