

THE REEF SEEKER



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HAPPY NEW YEAR

It's hard to believe that another year has come and gone. It's even harder to believe that it's been NINE years since we closed the doors at 8612 Wilshire. (Yes, I still wince when I drive by there.) But I want to start off 2016 the way I have started every year lately by very sincerely thanking all of you who continue to read these missives I send out regularly and who continue to dive with us. Those of you who know me well know that I really do love diving and I really do love taking you guys diving and experiencing with you all the wonders that the ocean has to offer. So many thanks from the bottom of my heart and here's looking towards a fabulous 2016 for everyone.

THE STATE OF THE OCEAN

Don't worry, this isn't going to be one of those long, educational tomes about shifting baselines and

the like. But, since I've been diving for the past 37 years, and since this marks the start of a new year, it always seems like a good time to reflect on what's come before and look at what might lie ahead.

It's now been four years since all of the Southern California MPAs as designed under the Marine Life Protection Act (MLPA) were put into effect. The rationale behind them was that by limiting what could be taken from inside the MPAs, the biomass (aka number of fish) would increase, eventually leading to a spill-over effect outside the MPAs, and we'd have healthy protected areas and healthy adjacent areas and everyone would be happy.

I'm not sure if "everyone's" happy, but the dire predictions of the decimation of the recreational fishing fleet certainly hasn't come to pass. I believe there's supposed to be a formal report/study conducted after five years (so sometime in 2017) but the anecdotal reports are that we're seeing more and more fish and that the MPAs are doing what they're supposed to do.

This would make sense and follow the results of the Channel Islands MPAs (the Northern Channel Islands off of Ventura and Santa Barbara). They were first implemented in 2003 and many of us involved in the MLPA after that

time would point to those as a good bellwether.

In the study done after the first five years of those MPAs, biomass was found to have increased greatly. After ten years, they say in that study "Overall, sea life inside these reserves is bigger and more abundant than outside the reserves." And we would assume the same would hold true for the SoCal MPAs over time.

We see similar trends around the world. You will always hear people lamenting that "It's not like it was when I started diving" and while that's likely true, we also need to remember that memory is not always reliable and things definitely get better and better as time passes. But there's no doubt that there are changes afoot everywhere.

I mentioned in our Palau trip report from this year that it had been eight years since I'd last visited and in that time, it seems like the day boats have proliferated unchecked. Where we used to have sites to ourselves in "the good old days," we now have to share with and maneuver around many smaller boats. About our experience at Ulong Channel I wrote, "Overall, the diving was good to occasionally excellent but also more crowded than I remember from eight years ago. Again, this seems due to the Chinese influx.

There were simply a LOT more day boats than I remember seeing in the past. When we were at Ulong Channel, I counted eight day boats, each with an average of 15 divers, sitting at the moorings, diving, or getting ready to dive. Add us in to the mix and that's 100 divers . . . on ONE site."

But the bottom line in all of this is this is the way the world is today. And while we can hopefully create more MPAs and just a general awareness of the plight of the oceans so people will want to take steps to help it improve, this all doesn't mean that everything now stinks and isn't worth visiting. It just means it's different and the experiences will be different.

Think of it this way: Anyone who's in their early 20s has never lived in a world without the instant communication (or miscommunication) of the Internet. Try to explain a world of faxes and telexes to them, let alone snail mail, and enjoy the blank stares.

In my acting career, I remember sitting around at auditions in the late 90s and we'd all complain about how bad things had gotten and long for the good old days of the 80s. Now I go to auditions and we all sit around and talk about how things have changed and marvel that now our perception of the 90s that we complained about is that they now seem like the good old days. Go figure.

The same thing in general holds true for the ocean. It's big, it beautiful, and it has a lot of secrets and experiences that it's still willing to share. We find them locally and also around the world. You just have to be willing to go out and find them.



THE STATE OF SCUBA TRAINING

I'll try not to get TOO soap-boxy on this one.

When I first got certified in 1978, I was enrolled in an 8-week course that was taught through the W&W Dive Shop in Richmond, Virginia. We met once a week for lecture (3 hours) and once a week for a pool sessions (also 3 hours). At the end of the 8 weeks, we did a Saturday of snorkel skills (including rescue), and then a Sunday that consisted of a whopping TWO scuba dives (that was the minimum requirement back then) and our "open water" was the infamous Gum Springs Quarry that you may have heard me talk about.

The real question is: Did this really prepare me and others to be out on our own in the ocean? Prob-

ably not. But we had a really good knowledge and understanding of what diving was all about through the 24 hours of classroom work, we had really good water skills through the 24 hours of pool work, and many of us kept diving with our instructor. In short, we weren't that experienced, but we had a good base of knowledge upon which to build.

During most of the time we had Reef Seekers open as a retail storefront, we ran either 4-week or 2-week classes. The 4-weekers were one lecture (3 hours each) and one pool (3 hours) each week, and the 2-weekers were two lectures and two pools each week. Both classes finished with at least an Avalon day (2-3 dives), a beach day (1 dive), and a boat day (2-4 dives). So these folks got 12 hours of lecture and 12 hours of pool along with 5-8 ocean dives.

Was this batch of divers better prepared than I was in 1978? From a supervised diving standpoint, absolutely. From a knowledge base, we simply tried to cram the same amount of material into half the time which probably meant we didn't cover it as thoroughly. But overall, I think the divers in this

2016 DIVING VACATIONS

March 11-19 • Yap

March 20-27 • Palau

June (dates TBA) • Bonaire

July 9-21 • Indonesia

scenario were better equipped to go out on their own than I was.

Moving into the present, I'm at times appalled at what passes for training. Basically, all of the classroom stuff – which provides an excellent opportunity to really see what individual students understood and what they don't – has moved to an on-line format. And while supporters argue that the same information is presented, I counter by saying that what it does is perhaps teach you the right answers, but it doesn't get a sense of whether or not you really comprehend the information.

Nowadays, pool sessions are sometimes jammed into one long 6-hour evening where all the skills are demonstrated (but can they be mastered) and then it's off to the beach the next day and a boat after that and congrats, you're now a certified diver, have a nice day. (I'm going to take the position that these people are not as well trained as under the previous scenarios.)

What does any of this matter? Well, studies have shown that about 80% of the people who get certified never do another class beyond their basic open water class. That means for those of us who teach, the OW class is our only shot to impart whatever we can. This whole idea of that it doesn't matter if we speed up and shorten (and short-change IMHO) the training because whatever we don't get to in basic OW we can cover in Advanced is simply a myth. Because if the people don't ever sign up for the second course, you can't fill in the gaps.

I used to classify people in OW classes into three categories. The first category was people who you could essentially give the card to

UPCOMING LOCAL DIVES

SO FAR FOR 2016

Avalon Underwater Cleanup

• • • February 20 • • •

Chamber Day & Eve

• • • May 4 • • •

on the spot. Comfortable in the water, perhaps with previous diving experience, quick learners. In a class of ten, that was maybe one or two people.

The second category was the people who needed a lot of help and it was questionable if they'd ever make it through a standard class in time. They had minimal water skills, were usually pretty nervous, and required a lot of hand-holding. Again, it was usually - in a class of ten - one or two people.

The third group was made up of people who were eager, had some problems along the way, maybe a little nervous but worked to overcome it and, with some minor guidance and encouragement, would be able to meet the requirements of the class. That was everyone else, which was usually 6-8 people.

The point of this is that while the class structure has changed, the types of people who take the classes hasn't. The people who were really good will have no problem under the new structure. But my concern is that people who fall into the second or third category may get short-changed. They don't get as much time with an instructor, the pace is much quicker (which is usually NOT a good thing if you're having problems), and there are certainly anecdotal stories all over the place of divers who are certified but don't seem to

know what they're doing.

The best cure for all of this (absent going back to the old ways) is experience. If you happen to be in the group of people who are certified but not confident in the water, then either doing a class or going on a trip is going to help a lot. And that's why we at Reef Seekers still do beach days, Avalon days, and our foreign trips as well.

Obviously, the beach and Avalon days are better-suited for those who might need more experience and, since they're always led by me, there's also time for informal impromptu instruction. It's a little tougher to do that on the foreign trips, and I generally don't like to do formal classes on those, but you'd be amazed at how much you learn and how quick the learning curve is when you are in a dive/dive/dive situation day after day. You get better quickly.

So while I could go on and on (and I'm sure some of you think I already have), the point of all of this is that regardless of when you were trained or how you were trained, there's always room for improvement. I really DO believe that a c-card is a license to learn. Even as an instructor with over 5,000 dives under my belt, I feel like I always learn something new on every dive. You can too. All you have to do I avail yourself of the opportunities in front of you.

PALAU IN 2016

We've still got one spot left (male share) in a deluxe stateroom on our Palau trip March 20-27. We'll be encamped on one of our favorite boats (the *Palau Aggressor 2*) with some of our favorite DMs to dive with in one of our favorite spots in the world. Palau's really a great place to experience the variety of diving from wrecks to walls to drift dives to stunning reefs which all contain big things and little things and everything in between.

Cost of the trip is \$3,495 which includes airport transfers, the boat, diving, food, crew tip, and overnight hotel on the way in. Airfare's running around \$2,100.

And that's all the more reason to

consider adding Yap at the front end as we'll be there from March 12-19. The airfare changes by maybe \$100 but now you can pick up a second week of great diving. In Yap, we'll get graceful Manta Rays, horny Mandarinfish, and hungry sharks (luckily they want the frozen bait, not us). Yap - also one of my favorite places in the world to spend a week - adds \$2,495 to the tab and includes airport transfers, ocean view deluxe room, breakfast daily, all diving including the Mandarinfish and Shark Feed dives, at least three manta dives, and plenty of other diving to round out each day.

If you're interested in one trip - or both (you could also do Yap-only) - be sure to contact us at 310/652-4990 and snag that last spot.



AVALON CLEANUP

The Avalon Cleanup will be held on Saturday, February 20 and we will take a group of divers over to dive the Green Pier. We'll cover the boat, the event, and gear storage (or Park diving). Plus you can win some nifty trash prizes and can also join us for our annual miniature golf tournament. If you want to sign up with Reef Seekers, give us a call at 310/652-4990 and let's get you on our list.

PICTURE PAGE - Rose Parade 2016

(All pix by Ken Kurtis © 2016)



The rowers are not made out of flowers



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Festive turtle



Flamingoes checking out the crowd



Gorgeous swan



Note how they do the fish scales