Underwater Photography, Part II

by Steve Fisher, APSA

Underwater photographers develop their own methods to work with the particular system they use. In daylight hours the ambient light is accurately accounted for in our images by using a light meter. Modern Nikonos cameras incorporate an excellent internal exposure meter but the L.E.D. lights are somewhat awkward to read with a dive mask on. To save time I use an auxiliary exposure meter -- on a lanyard -- that I stash in a B.C. (buoyancy compensator) pocket. It is easier to read at a glance and more accurate for specific areas of the water column.

On color film a rich blue background is often more desirable to the eye than black. To create this nice blue I point my auxiliary meter about 20 degrees away from the sun and base my f:stop on this exposure reading. Of course my camera must be pointed in this direction! Whichever direction you point your lens, take various exposure readings from those backgrounds. Be mindful of clouds, boats and surface water conditions that may cause drastic light changes which require exposure adjustments to your camera.

Underwater Perspectives:

Many underwater photos get impact by composing with an upward camera angle to incorporate the ambient light above -- particularly silhouette shots which require subject isolation against a lighter background.

Macro images can also benefit by incorporating the blue background and balancing a fill flash of the main subject in the foreground. Since your exposure is based on a probable lower numbered f:stop, the depth of field will be greatly diminished. So concentrate on the prime area where sharpness is critical, e.g. the eye of a fish.

For dramatic wide-angle images we use a technique often referred to as “close focus wide angle” where a strobe is used to light the close foreground main subject with a fair portion of blue background punctuated by a secondary subject in silhouette, e.g. a diver or boat. The trick is to reduce the power of the strobe light (use manual settings) to softly light the prominent foreground subject (usually requiring a wider aperture setting), balancing the foreground artificial light with the ambient water beyond. Fortunately depth of field is not as much of a concern with wide angle compared to the macro techniques.

Basic Composition:

Get low to your intended subject. That forces you to employ an upward composition. Reef walls and outcroppings are ideal places to locate prominent subjects. A cooperative partner (model) can conveniently add a secondary human element.

Models:

Underwater modeling is an art form all to itself and I would like to touch on just a few tips to bear in mind. Working with a model underwater can seem like work but the casual use of a willing partner should not overwhelm your diving enjoyment and will add lots of interest to photo results.

Brighter suit colors (vs. the standard black of old) add impact to underwater scenes. Be certain to streamline equipment by clipping gauges and hoses snugly to the body. Excess weight belt straps should be tucked in. The photographer must instruct the model where to be in the image. So hand signals are a necessary way to communicate. Before the dive, formulate some hand signals with the modeling partner on how to interact with an intended subject, e.g., body attitude. For close-in modeling attempt to light the model's face within the dive mask. Have the model face the camera just enough to see both eyes, then signal to have the model shift eyes (only slightly) into the direction of an intended subject. Nearly all impromptu models will invariably want to look at the camera -- as if having a personal underwater portrait. Asking this model to look at something else in the direction of the reef subject will create better interaction in the environmental shot.

Good buoyancy control is critical for the modeling diver especially to avoid kicking up sand/ sediment. Grabbing the reef while the photographer works is another NO-NO. After the film results are in, be sure the model reviews them with the photographer. Critique exposure, composition and other elements that are recorded hopefully to improve on subsequent underwater modeling adventures.

Next edition --
Vacation Dive Trips, some interesting experiences and lessons learned.