



“The Buddy System”

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Does the Buddy System still exist? It sure does, but so do the Whales, Manatees, and other endangered species.

Diving and diving habits have gone through some very dramatic changes in the last several years, and so did the buddy system. It is evident on every dive site and at every dive resort. Divers usually make the entry together, conduct the dive in the same ocean, and sometimes exit together. But that is a far cry from a buddy system.

Lets take a look at what a buddy system should be.

Two divers preparing for a dive should make sure of an emergency plan and procedures. They should also review underwater communications, agree on their planned activity and the dive profile. After suiting up they should perform a “Buddy Check”. That should include becoming familiar with the buddy’s equipment while checking each piece of equipment for proper function, placement, and making sure their air supply is full and valve turned on. This is being taught in every entry level scuba course, or at least it should be. What went wrong?

For most part of the dive, usually the buddy is just another diver hovering somewhere near by doing their own thing. No wonder that the buddy system falls aside. But what if one of the divers develops a problem. In such a situation, no matter how minor or serious the problem is, underwater or on the surface, the buddy should be close by and is trained to assist. Otherwise, it’s not a buddy system. In fact it is worst then a buddy system, instead of one casualty, potentially it could be a double fatality in the attempt of trying to handle unfamiliar techniques that are beyond their ability. That means the buddy must be trained in diver rescue. However, if one diver is counting on the other in case of an emergency for help, then the other buddy must be trained as well to be able to reciprocate when needed. In other words, both members of the Buddy System must be independently capable divers, and both must have been trained in Diver Rescue. Without that ability, the buddy system does not exist.

According to the major certifying agencies of all the new divers certified annually, only about 2% have taken a diver rescue course. That means that 98% of divers are not diving in a buddy system. They may think they are because they were told by their Instructors that they are, but they are not. If they can’t act independently and can’t help their buddy, they are in fact diving solo.

If we are to continue promoting buddy system diving, how can we remedy this situation? The solution is easy. Apply one of the first Laws of Learning. Give them “The Need to

Know, and tell them the truth, that venturing underwater can potentially be hazardous. Therefore training is necessary to recognize the dangers, and should an emergency occur, training is mandatory if they are to survive the incident. How else can we expect them to be interested in taking a rescue course. All the available wonderful texts, CD-ROM's, and videos will not get them to sign up, THE TRUTH WILL. Yes, the worst nightmare of many dive operators will come true. Students having that information, some of them may decide not wanting to continue with learning to dive. But that is O.K., that is not so terrible, there is no great harm in loosing those that are concerned about water being wet. Contrary to a common misconception, diving is not for everybody. If a diver can not be a buddy, that diver should not dive without the supervision of a trained paid dive leader.

At every dive convention, the same cries from dive operators voice out in unison, "We need to attract more public to the sport", "there is too much competition from other sports", "training organizations should be doing more advertising for us", etc, etc. All these statements are true. In fact, seldom there is a "learn to dive" message in other than dive magazines. We advertise to ourselves, since most dive publications are read by divers anyway, the message does not reach the non-diving public. But what are we doing to keep those students that we already have? The drop out rate of consumers who take and complete a diving course is approximately 85%. There are approximately 400,000 new divers certified annually. DAN (Divers Alert Network) year after year reports approximately 2,000,000 - 4,000,000 active divers in the industry. DAN admits that it is difficult to estimate accurate number of divers. But at a rate of 400,000 new divers every year, why there is not a major increase in the estimate? The 85% drop out rate of those who sign up for a Scuba course, buy mask, fins, and snorkel, complete a course and get certified, and then never dive again does look realistic. Why such a great drop out rate? The reasons are many. Competition from other sports and hobbies, too much work and too little time to play, the sport is too expensive, the water is too cold, can't afford a dive vacation, and many other reasons are all true. But the biggest reason is because the first 60 seconds of the first open water training dive was not as much "fun" as they were led to believe. Intimidated, exhausted, concerned for their own safety, leaves the impression that this diving stuff is just not worth it getting up early in the morning on a day off from work. If we could only decrease the drop out rate by a few percent, it could double the diving industry business.

So, if we tell our students of the additional necessary training, some will drop out. But those would probably drop out anyway. Those that would stay, would most likely become avid divers. They would be better trained, they would eat, drink, breathe and think diving. They would dive more often, and that also means more equipment sales and future business. Ok, I see the point, we can also try to keep the less ambitious about learning to dive. We can create another level of certification.

For those that want to learn to dive and occasionally travel to a dive resort, we can offer a "Guided Diver" Certification. To earn that level, all it takes is attending and successfully completing a Scuba course as it exists right now.

But those who want to learn to dive unsupervised, as Buddy System, they must qualify for a "Scuba Diver" Certification. That would require in addition to the standard course, successful completion of an Advanced Diver Course and a Rescue Diver Course. A little

insult can go a long way. Most will not want to be just “Guided Divers”, they will want to independent be divers. There is a major difference between being a diver and just participating in diving class to be able to go on a diving tour while led by the hand. We need real divers if the industry is to survive. If a business is not growing, it is receding.

Let’s bring “Continued Education” back. Let’s back up the outstanding slogans with real training. Let’s get every diver to be a Rescue Diver. Let’s train them to be independent divers, and the benefits will be glorious. Think! More active divers that stay with the sport generate safer diving and more equipment sales. As for marketing, word of mouth is a very powerful advertising method, instead, “Yeah, diving is O.K.”, the word will be “diving is great”. What more can a dive operation ask for.