

TRAINING

Photo by Bill Leger

Occupational Health and Safety: Part 4

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OCCUPATIONAL RISKS OF LEADERSHIP

In this fourth part of our series, we'll move on from risks associated with our equipment, such as compressors and cylinders, and general gear handling, to risks we encounter in our day-to-day work as dive leaders, especially those involving our customers, such as injuries, cold and dehydration. Then we'll close with a few general, not specifically diving-related hazards, such as those of our workplace and the vacation lifestyle.

DIVING AND DIVE LEADERS

KITTING UP AND DOWN – Not only do leaders have to kit up their own gear, but they sometimes also kit up for their customers, so bear in mind what was presented in Part 3 (*Sources*, second quarter 2017) about the total amount of weight they have to lift and handle.

DCS AND PREDISPOSITION – Although most dive leaders dive using computers, they often push the limits of safe diving practices by doing back-to-back diving,

staying down with the last diver at the bottom, and then assisting with gear handling when they get back to the boat and the shore. Add in the lack of rest and sleep, dehydration and sweating in the sun, and you have a higher risk for decompression sickness.

CUTS AND BRUISES – When pointing out smaller items on the reef, inexperienced divers often congregate around the dive leader, who may get pushed into the reef, causing cuts and bruises. This crowding is especially likely if you are leading divers who have not been trained for the diving conditions. People living far away from the sea are often trained in freshwater quarries and get certified and let loose without proper guidance on possible ocean conditions.

OVERWEIGHTED OR UNDERWEIGHTED DIVERS – Dive leaders often have to carry spare weights for “just-in-case” underweighted divers, or take on a weight from an overweighted diver. Consider the

risks the dive leader takes when diving with a number of newbies or students.

LOST DIVERS – This is any dive leader's worst nightmare! You never know when a diver will come to you to indicate that he has lost his buddy. The dive leader suddenly has to make a decision on the conditions, the group, the ability of the lost diver and how to proceed: Abort? Search? What is the correct action? Often the lost buddy will have simply returned to the boat without telling anyone, but until that has been confirmed, there is a lot of additional stress on the leader.

DIFFICULT DIVERS – What if you have a diver who insists on doing some off-the-wall thing like lying on the reef while taking photos? You warn them, but at a certain stage, you simply decide that is it: This diver has to get out of the water before some injury or damage happens. Trust me, you may well face the wrath of that diver after the dive. Be prepared to handle it as diplomatically as possible.

STINGERS, SCRAPERS, SNAPPERS – I have seen dive leaders have to put themselves between a student or diver and some potential hazard, sometimes resulting in stings, scrapes or cuts. Then there is the risk that the dive leader will have to take out the next load of divers without sufficient time to get the injury properly looked after, risking further complications.

SUNBURN/HYPERTHERMIA – While leaders warn clients about sun protection, they often overlook themselves as they rush through preparations. Although those nice tanned bodies and bleached blond hair are admired by some, the skin takes the punishment, and melanomas can be the result.

HYPOTHERMIA – Back-to-back diving, especially in colder waters and windy conditions without proper protection other than wetsuits, leads to cooling of core body temperatures. Do we allow for sufficient warming-up time?

DEHYDRATION – Late nights sitting around with our partying customers, followed by early mornings and many cups of coffee to get restarted, lead to dehydration. Sensible moderation is necessary. And do we allow for sufficient water intake between dives?

CURRENTS – Diving in a current while trying to keep a group together takes a big toll on dive leaders: Diver physical exhaustion, swimming after divers, resolving problems and diver separation are all factors we must be prepared to handle.

OFFICE HAZARDS

PAPER CUTS – How often have you seen people get a paper cut and simply put their finger in their mouth, suck on it to stop the blood, and not get proper first-aid treatment? The risk in the office is not large, but what if a paper cut occurs just before a dive and the person has to enter dirty water? There is increased risk of infection.

STAPLERS – A staple remover is designed to remove staples from papers. Using your fingernails to remove a staple can result in the staple getting shoved underneath your nail, and the same risks as with paper cuts apply.

ERGONOMICS – The way we sit or stand, the time we spend sitting or standing, and lengthy computer use can go a long way toward causing back pain. Use correct posture when sitting or using a computer.

GENERAL HAZARDS

WILD ANIMALS (SNAKES, RATS, MONKEYS) – Remote dive locations are often in areas where wildlife is abundant. In South Africa, we have a problem with baboons, which can become aggressive if you try to shoo them away. Divers and staff need to be warned of the risks from these types of animals.

MOSQUITOES – Dengue fever and malaria are but two illnesses transmitted through mosquitoes. Special consideration needs to be given when diving in areas where mosquitoes are a problem, and proper preventive actions must be taken. Find out which prophylactics provide the correct protection. Do they have any side effects while diving? Your customers need to be informed.

TRIPS AND SLIPS – Loose cables, uneven walkways and loose stones are often the cause of injuries. A detailed inspection of all walking areas must be made to ensure that any possible hazards have been identified and marked or removed.

TRAVEL TO AND FROM THE DIVE SITE – Poor roads, late-night travels or rural areas with game crossing the roads often lead to accidents and injuries. And accidents that occur on isolated roads or late at night often mean that there will be no help soon. How many people actually have first-aid kits in their cars? Or fire extinguishers?

EATING AND DRINKING – Diarrhea is often caused by strange foods when diving at new destinations, and it can cause dehydration if left untreated. Also possible are allergic reactions to medications meant to stop diarrhea.

TRAINING

LATE HOURS – We have already talked about late hours as they apply to the dive leader. Parties can go on into the wee hours of the morning, and then the dive leader is waiting for customers, many of whom appear in less-than-stellar condition. Yet the leader has the task of leading the group, and the risks are certainly greater. Be aware.

EMOTIONAL STATES - I am often astounded by the way assistants are handled. They are there to support us, but often they are misused and do all the dirty work, too often without even a simple thank-you from the leader. Assistants are also human, and we need to take care of them. When they have done something not according to your liking, take them to one side and

counsel them in private. Don't shout, scream and dress them down in front of others.

Emotional states can be a bigger issue than physical factors. Consider staff's physical and emotional wellness. Think about them when you send them out with customers. Are they in a good state of mind to deal with difficult customers and situations? Are they perhaps leading the dive under peer pressure because they feel they cannot afford to miss this dive and lose out on their pay or even their job?

SUMMARY

As dive leaders, we need to ensure that diving remains a good and safe experience for all taking part in the sport: customers, students, assistants and colleagues. We

should frequently take a long, hard look at the way we are doing things, consider the possibilities of anything going wrong, and take measures to ensure that everybody continues to enjoy a healthy and problem-free diving career, unburdened by physical and mental scars that could have been prevented or mitigated by us. In their retirement, all divers should be able to sit on their porches or in their gardens and remember the good times they had diving the world over.

In the next and final article in this series, we will be discussing general concepts of risk assessment and mitigation.

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