

# ***Guidelines for Underwater Photographers***

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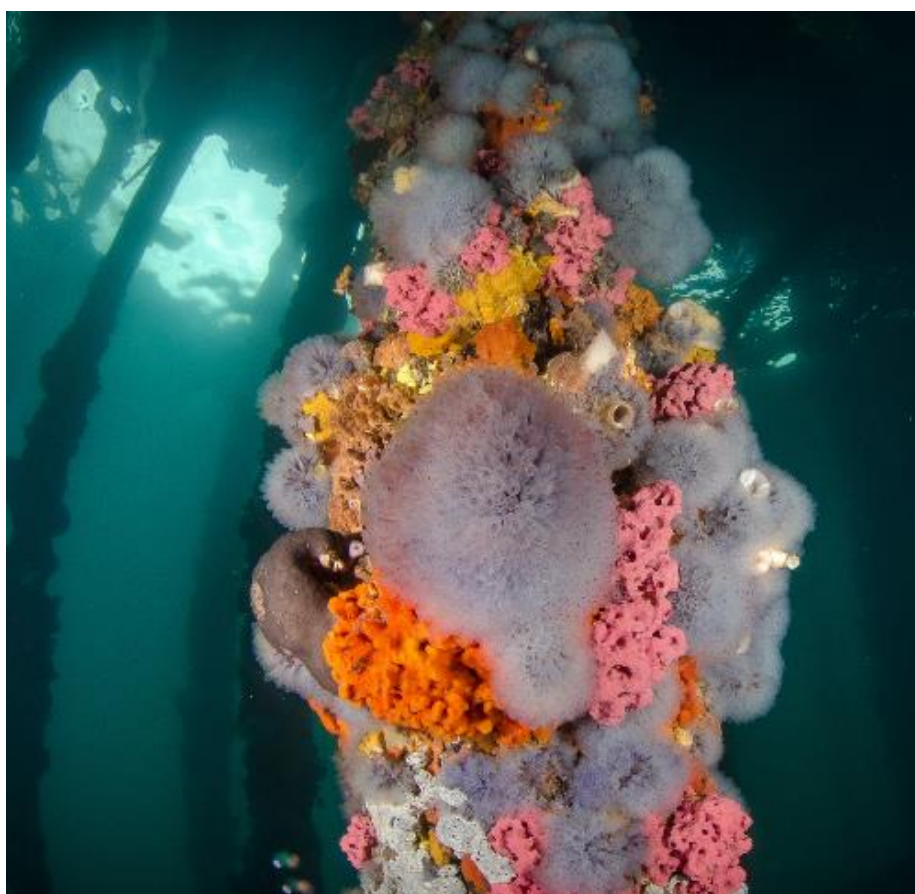


Our marine environment is a beautiful and fascinating place so it's no wonder that many scuba divers want to photograph it.

These guidelines are for all those underwater photographers who are passionate about exploring and protecting the world beneath the waves, to preserve it for future generations.

## **1. Buoyancy**

You should be able to hold your place in the water column steadily without hands and fins waving around so you don't disturb the critters and their habitats (ie: correct weighting is a must!) Your favourite underwater animal is less likely to swim off or hide away if you are calm with little movement so you can get that awesome shot you want- of them looking natural in their undisturbed home, of course! A site with a silty/sandy bottom can end up turning into a sandstorm if your fins are hitting the bottom, or you might knock the colourful sponges off the pylons if you aren't able to manoeuvre gently around them. We must avoid damaging the environment to get that spectacular shot, and remember our whole photographic endeavour to record and protect our underwater world from damage.



*Lovely, intact sponge covered pylons at Edithburgh jetty*

## 2. Trim

Keep nice and flat in the water, and fins and hands off the seabed as much as possible (you might be unintentionally squashing or brushing aside and moving a critter under your fin or hand without even knowing it!) Always check before putting down a finger or other part of your body to anchor yourself.



*Seahorses will often sit at the tops of the weed at night and are vulnerable to fin kicks or hands waving around by divers trying to stabilise themselves.*

## 3. Do not lie on the seabed

Keep off the bottom as much as possible and do not grab onto foliage, sponges or a pylon even – you could be injuring a cool critter that you might not have seen yet! Limit your contact with the seabed and the environment. There are a lot of animals that you can't see easily, that are tiny and/or well camouflaged, for example pipefish that hide in amongst the grasses or blennies living in the sponges on the pylons.



*Tiny pipefish peering up from the grasses at Port Hughes jetty*

4. **Move in a slow, controlled and gentle manner**

Approach critters slowly and gently using a very gentle frog kick. You don't want to scare them away before you've got your shot, nor do you want backscatter in your photo. Give them space, don't get too close – 'social distance' with the critters! They don't like to get up close and personal with us. When you are finished taking the photo, ensure that you swim away gently, preferably using reverse kick finning and try to swim around the critter rather than up and over the top of them. You don't want your fins to, for example knock into that Leafy that you just shot. No one wants a Leafy with broken appendages!



*Diver keeping his distance (& bright lights off) as he shoots a Leafy Sea Dragon*



*Go slow & gentle, with good buoyancy and look carefully - you might find a surprise, like this baby weedy hiding in the weed under a jetty.*

**5. Don't let anything hang and drag along the bottom.**

Stow away SMBs, hoses, torches and anything hanging so it can't get caught on the foliage for example. Everything should be tucked away – even your camera if you're not using it!



*Diver under a jetty hovering above the bottom with camera and all equipment tucked away so it doesn't drag & pull out the seagrass.*

**6. Don't touch or move anything!**

Not only can it directly disturb the critter so that it moves away, and even indirectly by altering its home/shelter, but it is also thought that touching or moving them can cause stress and possibly lead to behavioural changes and even disease, particularly for very sedentary and slow-moving animals like anglerfish, especially while guarding their eggs.



*Angler fish (shot from a distance) hiding behind a shell in amongst seagrass, protecting his eggs at Port Hughes jetty*

**7. Avoid or limit bright lights where possible**

Especially at night – it is commonly observed that most critters are light sensitive (eg: seahorses, squid etc) and unnatural light exposure has already been found to cause hormone imbalances in certain species of fish while the long term effects on other marine animals is unknown. So we should be mindful of how much light we are subjecting our favourite critters to as we don't want to harm them. Try and use strobes since they give short, sharp bursts of bright light, and ideally use red focus lighting. Minimise continuous use of super bright video lights. Ideally avoid using video lights at night especially on sea dragons, sea horses and pipefish which are particularly sensitive. Give the critter a break if you haven't nailed the shot yet, cover your torch for a while, turn it away or just come back later. A lot of animals will turn and hide away from white lights, and others close their eyes - which doesn't make a great shot anyway! Try and limit yourself to a maximum of five shots and if you haven't got your photo by then, try another time.



*Photographer has used a red light to get an 'eyes open' shot of a pair of mating Pyjama Squid.*

**8. Be patient.**

Sometimes it's best to just hover off to the side and watch the critters and wait (with lights off or dimmed) before slowly approaching. They will often get comfortable after you have been there a while and will go about their normal habits and probably even move to themselves into the perfect position for your shot – which is when you can get a great natural photo!

*This mouth brooding fish (Southern Gobbleguts) with eggs in its mouth eventually turned around for the shot (photo cropped).*



#### 9. Muck sticks

These handy tools should only be used to gently brush aside foliage for example, not for anchoring or moving along the bottom by stabbing them into the sand. Chances are there is a tiny critter you haven't seen crawling along or you might destroy a critter's home. If there's too much current so that you can't remain stable without stabbing your muck stick in the seabed or having limited contact with the bottom, you might need to come back another time to get the photo you're aiming for. The critters are probably hiding away or being thrown around making a good shot almost impossible anyway! Muck sticks should never be used to poke critters to move or change their orientation which has been shown to cause stress in various species.



*Lots of cool little critters like nudibranchs can be found crawling along the bottom and are too tiny to see easily so best not stab that muck stick into the sand!*

#### 10. Gloves

If you don't get seriously cold hands & can manage without them, ditch the gloves! You'll have more dexterity which will help you control your equipment and photography gear, and it'll be easier to remember to not touch anything!

#### 11. Diving with Dragons in South Australia

Almost everyone wants to see a Leafy or a Weedy, but we ask you to photograph them responsibly! We recommend that you read the *Code of Conduct for Diving with Dragons* available at <https://cdn.environment.sa.gov.au/landscape/docs/hf/seadragon-code-of-conduct-fact.pdf>.

#### In conclusion

Ideally you should try to perfect your skills of buoyancy and trim before trying underwater photography. Give yourself time to dive, dive, dive and practice, practice, practice your skills, then add the camera later when you are entirely comfortable and in control in the water. Take the time to observe the marine environment – the plants and animals, watch their behaviours and their habitats. You will learn so much and get so much joy from your photography if you follow these handy hints and will be protecting our precious underwater world at the same time.

## References

Code of Conduct for Diving with Dragons

<https://cdn.environment.sa.gov.au/landscape/docs/hf/seadragon-code-of-conduct-fact.pdf>

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