

Chapter 7 Everything I Know About This Stuff I Learned From...

My first mentor in the field of underwater photography was Howard Hall, the famous marine film-maker and still photographer. That was long before I knew Howard personally. I started taking pictures underwater in the late 1970s. I was learning largely by trial and error, and after firing off maybe 5,000 images I finally got a few that were scientifically identifiable. When that happened I was hooked forever. In 1985 I bought Howard's book, *"Guide to Successful Underwater Photography,"*⁵ first printed in 1982, next in 1985. In the book's foreword Ron and Valerie Taylor pay tribute to Howard's work, *"Now, Howard Hall has written a book telling everyone a way to take underwater photographs that's better than any other way and in a language that's clear, to the point, and easily understood."* That was an understatement.

In simple, straightforward terms Howard explained the fundamentals of how to take a good picture underwater, primarily by showing a series of 33 actual photographs he had made, and then explaining how he made them. He did all that in a way that was not overly technical or pretentious. He introduced the concept of "close-focus, wide-angle photography," which literally revolutionized the field of underwater scenic photography and is used now by virtually every professional and "serious amateur" underwater still photographer. This was a truly "honest" how-to book. Howard didn't hint at things like other authors did, giving up just enough of the secret to keep you interested but holding back the really good stuff as a teaser for the next book.

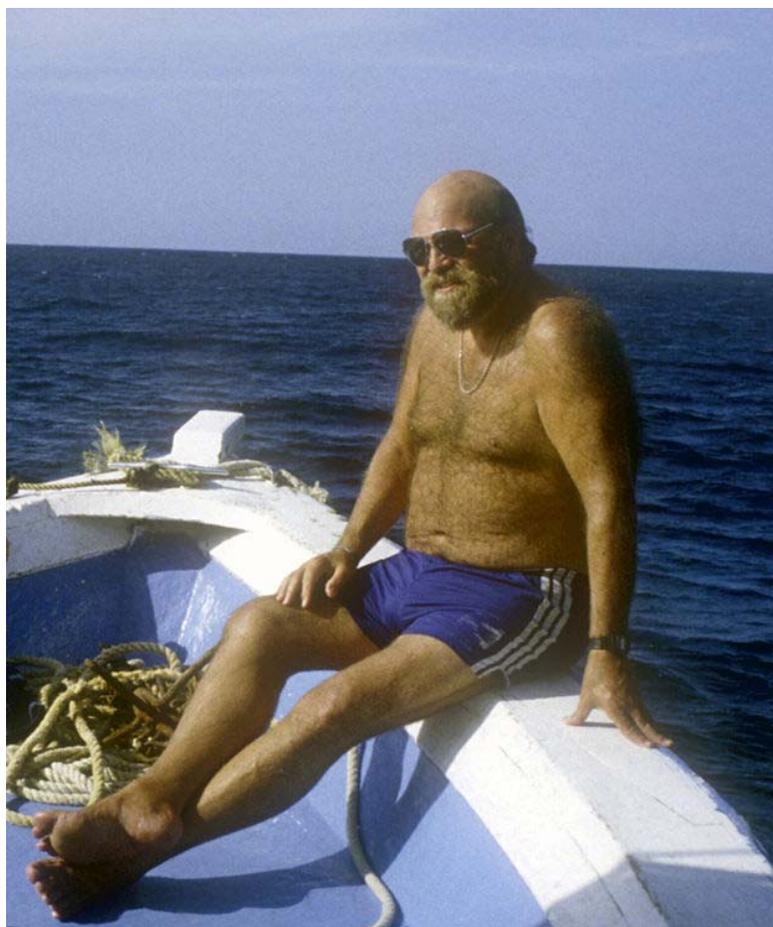


Howard Hall, Anacapa Island, California, dive boat "Truth," 1995

⁵ Hall, H., *"Guide to Successful Underwater Photography,"* Marcor Publishing, ISBN 0-932248-03-9, 1982

In this book he actually offered valuable, practical secrets of underwater photography. I still consider it the best underwater “how-to” photography book ever written. Reading this book was a major influence in my development as an underwater photographer. Later I actually met Howard personally and had the opportunity to dive with him and his wife Michele while they were filming an episode of their wonderful video series and book, “*Secrets of the Ocean Realm*”⁶. Watching the way he worked underwater was a great thrill and a further inspiration.

My first flesh and blood mentor was Jim Cooluris. Jim was the founder of the *Channel Islands Underwater Photographic Society* (CIUPS), a group of talented divers and photographers based in Oxnard, California. I met Jim and a group of CIUPS members by coincidence in 1985 on a dive trip in the Sea of Cortez on the old “*Baja Explorador*,” one of the first liveaboard dive boats in the world. As a result of that meeting I joined CIUPS and was an active member for about ten years. Jim has vast experience with diving and underwater photography, and he shared it freely and generously:

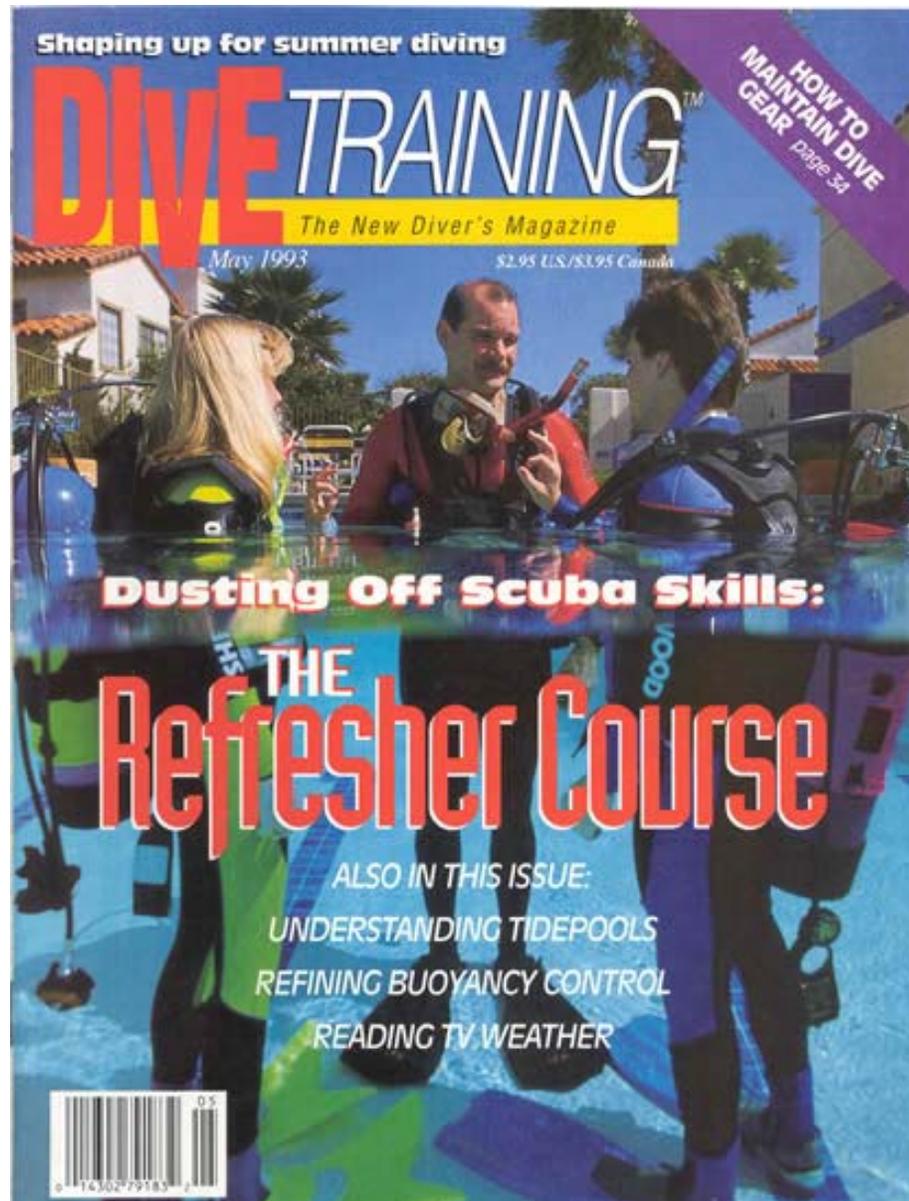


Jim Cooluris in Roatan, Honduras, 1987

I developed many friendships with the club members; however two CIUPS members in particular taught me much about making pictures underwater. Neither was a professional underwater photographer, but considering their talent, each could have been. The first was John Dyer. An extremely competent diver and world-class photographer, I consider John to

⁶ Hall, M. and Hall, H., “*Secrets of the Ocean Realm*,” Beyond Words Publishing, Inc., ISBN 0-7867-0453-5, 1997

be among the finest underwater photographers in the world. I am surprised that he never “turned pro.” His work is magnificent and compares favorably with that of the masters like Newbert and Hall. Like them, he had an artistic style that was wonderful and unique, and a rare insight and sensitivity to marine creatures and the ocean environment. Much of what I learned from John came from watching him work on CIUPS dive trips, mostly in California waters but also on a few warm-water trips we did together. He was always giving with his time and knowledge when I would ask him questions. Once I asked John to be a model for me in a cover I was shooting for Dive Training Magazine. Here he is as the “instructor” on the May 1993 DTM front cover, teaching my son Dirk and my daughter-in-law Kristen how to “dust off their scuba skills:”



John Dyer, center, a formidable instructor and underwater photographer

My other CIUPS mentor was Mike Watkins. Mike, like John, was a superb diver and an excellent underwater photographer. Mike’s photography was outstanding although I don’t think he was as serious about it as was John. He taught me a lot about equipment and technique. He also told me, accurately, where I could find *simnias*, the little red California

marine snail that makes one of the best underwater subjects around. I knew I was accepted by the CIUPS “in-group” when Mike told me how to find *simnias*. I will always be grateful for that; those tiny red snails were the subjects of some of my favorite photos. Mike and I got to be good personal friends and we traveled together on many dive trips around the world. He taught me the often-painful art of beach diving in California. Eventually Mike’s interest in underwater photography waned and he turned more to hunting. He always had a freezer full of lobster and halibut filets. He tried to teach me hunting, but I was a bad student. I had the thrill of seeing him take a large halibut at Zuma Beach once. Unfortunately we drifted apart over the years but I will never forget his friendship, wisdom, warmth and humor, and all the things he taught me in the early part of my underwater photography learning curve.



Mike Watkins and two big bugs from San Nicolas on the PEACE, late 1980s

Two professional photographers were major mentors and became good friends, Marty Snyderman and Chris Newbert. I met Marty on a caged blue shark trip he led out of San Diego in the late 80s. Hearing him talk and watching him work the sharks made me realize

that he was something special. I think Marty's main interest is film but he is an outstanding still photographer. He is a prolific writer, and although I have known him personally for many years, much of what I learned from him came from his articles in various diving magazines and publications. I also attended several of Marty's lectures at dive show seminars. Like Howard Hall, Marty doesn't sandbag. He tells you how to do it in no uncertain terms.



Marty Snyderman (left) being tasted by blue shark (right), off San Diego, 1988

Years ago I signed up for a humpback whale trip Marty was running in the Silver Banks area of the Caribbean north of the Dominican Republic. He and I both missed our flight (the last one) out of Miami to Puerto Plata where we were to have boarded the boat. Having no chance to catch up with the boat, we pondered our fates. Here we were in Florida in February facing a week with nothing to do. We could have just gone back home, he to San Diego, me to LA. However we decided to make the most of it and we ended up in Homosassa Springs photographing manatees in the Crystal River. Along the way we caught a spring training game in Winter Park (we are both big baseball fans and ex-college players.) In spite of the bad start, it turned out to be a fun week. I got my best manatee photos ever, and Marty got some that he has published many times. Marty wrote a magazine article about our Florida misadventures turned adventures which he called "*When Life Gives You Lemons, Make Lemonade.*"

Marty and I once made an interesting trade. He used over forty of my photographs in the second edition of his beautiful book "*California Marine Life.*"⁷ In return for the use of the photos, he let me dead-head for a week as an observer with his crew making a film on shark

⁷ Snyderman, M., "*California Marine Life,*" Roberts Rinehart Publishers with Monterey Bay Aquarium, ISBN 1-57098-127-2, 1998

behavior⁸ on the great boat “*Undersea Hunter*” at Cocos Island in Costa Rica. **By far** I got the better part of that deal.

More than any other person, Chris Newbert influenced how I tried to take pictures underwater. I strived, no; I **ached** to make my pictures look like his. I never succeeded, no-one has (with the exception of his wife Birgitte (Deda) Wilms), but his advice and guidance clearly made my photography better. Most people never meet someone who does one thing better than anyone else in the whole world. In knowing Chris, I have had that opportunity. He is, in my opinion, simply the best underwater photographer in the world. His mastery over the art and science of underwater photography is unmatched.

I first heard of Chris in 1985, shortly after he published his classic book, “*Within a Rainbowed Sea*.”⁹ I read a few glowing reviews of the book in the dive magazines. At that time I was starting to make some decent underwater images myself, and was pretty impressed with my own abilities and what I thought was my vast knowledge of who was who in the field. Newbert was an unknown (to me), and I read the reviews with some skepticism. How could anybody I hadn’t heard of be as good as these critics said he was? The answer came quickly. Chris was doing a “book tour,” promoting “*Within a Rainbowed Sea*” by presenting slide shows to dive clubs and underwater photo groups around the country. Through a connection with someone at CIUPS he scheduled a show for the club in Oxnard. I attended. Nothing about underwater photography was ever quite the same for me. I was blown away by the quality of his images, his knowledge of the marine life they depicted, and the techniques he used to make them. Of course I bought the book. I savored every photograph, every word of the beautiful prose Chris used to describe them. Yes, he can write too. I had never seen anything like his photography. Chris’s photography was both intimidating and inspiring. Intimidating because it showed me how far I had to go; inspiring because someone had already been there. I became a lifetime Newbert disciple.

I first got to know him personally when Mike Watkins and I signed up for a Hawaii trip on the Kona Aggressor on which Chris was advertised as the photo pro. Chris did this as a favor for the Aggressor Fleet to promote the new boat. Chris offered his multi-day photo course on this trip, and Mike and I eagerly attended each session. We also watched him work underwater. Chris formed a travel company called Rainbowed Sea Tours, which runs limited-capacity underwater photo trips on the best boats in the world’s greatest locations. Chris and Deda personally lead and host each of these trips. I have now done Rainbowed Sea trips with them to the Red Sea, the Galapagos Islands, the Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea. I cannot express in words how important his advice, instruction, encouragement and friendship have been for me in my efforts to make good underwater photographs. Here are Chris and Deda enjoying a 1992 sunset in the Red Sea:

⁸ Snyderman, M., “*Secret World of Sharks and Rays*,” PBS NATURE series, 1998

⁹ Newbert, C., “*Within a Rainbowed Sea*,” Beyond Words Publishing Company, ISBN 0-681-29908-8, 1984



Chris Newbert and his wife Birgitte (Deda) Wilms, Red Sea, 1992

The Author

Ken Bondy has been diving and taking pictures underwater for 30 years. He has logged more than 2000 dives in the world's greatest dive destinations. He lives in Southern California with his wife Pam and his English bulldog Sarah. He is retired from a long career as a structural engineer specializing in the design of concrete building structures.



Ken Bondy (photo by Amos Nachoum, Cocos Island)

