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THE WORLD AS IT IS

IMPROVING THE BUDDY SYSTEM

Sue Crowe

Key Words

Buddies, safety.

The ideal buddy system

Learner divers are told the "buddy system" is the best way to dive. But what exactly does having a buddy mean and is it the best system for all of us?

When I learnt to dive I was told that one should always dive with a buddy because:

your buddy checks your equipment and you theirs,
buddies keep an eye on each other,
your buddy is there when you need assistance and vice versa,
your buddy can save your life and you can do the same for them, and
having a buddy makes diving more fun.

In the PADI open water manual, the buddy system only rates one page and I quote,

"You should always dive with a buddy who stays nearby at all times. A buddy provides general assistance in putting on and checking your equipment before the dive; in helping remind you of your depth, time and air supply limits; and in giving you emergency assistance in the unlikely event you need it. Your buddy will get the same assistance from you and both of you will feel more secure diving together than alone.

"Diving is a social activity - diving with someone adds to the fun. Together you and your buddy will share experiences and witness the immense variety of scenes the underwater world displays. You may be surprised how many new friends you meet through diving and the buddy system.

"Keep in mind the three general reasons for diving with a buddy: 1) practicality, 2) safety and 3) fun. Remember you have a responsibility to your diving partner and that for the buddy system to work, you and your buddy must want it to work. Realise the need and value of the buddy system and decide now to always abide by it while diving."

Quite a responsibility. Most people do dive with a buddy. BUT during my diving years, the reality of the buddy system has been quite different.

The actual buddy system

For a start, if I am diving somewhere and I don't know anyone, I am usually buddied with a diver who I know nothing about. Once I was buddied with a diver, who, it turned out after I asked a few questions, did not even have a ticket!

Often, depending on which ticket I give the shop, I am buddied with a brand new diver and am expected to look after them and hold their hand. Most of the time this is fine but often I have to cut my dive short because my new buddy has run low on air or they are so nervous that I spend all my time watching them carefully and not enjoying the dive.

I have had buddies I have had to chase all over the dive site just to keep up and then they have the audacity to

complain they didn't see anything! One of the things they definitely missed was me! The sad buddy stories are too many to mention.

I am not saying the buddy system is all bad. Just that it is not always that good and people have to be realistic about it. Do we expect too much of the buddy system? I think we do.

On the other hand I have had absolutely wonderful buddies who I would dive with over and over. The best buddies are without a doubt the people you dive most with, people who know you, who accept your limits as well as knowing their own. People who do not push you into a dive you do not want to do. People who are self reliant but prefer diving with you because they enjoy the company not because they are relying on you to bail them out if something goes wrong. Buddies who are there for you no matter what, buddies who are well trained, this is the buddy system at its best.

Self-sufficiency is really the only answer. If you can look after yourself but are aware of and care about your diving partner, you will probably be a great buddy.

To work, the buddy system has to be understood. There has to be a reasonable amount of communication before and during the dive. Buddies should stay together. I might start my dive with a buddy but unfortunately there is no guarantee that an unknown buddy will end the dive with me unless tied to me by a buddy line as Royal Australian Navy divers are. Too many divers (126 between 1972 and 1993) have died separated from their buddies, either before the incident (87) or during in the incident (39). They provided 71% of the 178 scuba divers who died in Australia during those 22 years.¹

What is a good buddy?

Being a good buddy means different things to different people and this is where the problems lie. To be a great buddy takes dedication and practice, lots of it.

At the recent Melbourne Dive Show and OzTek2000, I did a small survey and asked passers by what their definition of a good buddy was. Here are some of the responses:

Someone who doesn't complain;
 Someone with a big light/torch;
 Someone capable of looking after themselves;
 Someone who won't worry when they discover I'm not there;
 Someone who will stick closely by my side;
 Someone who will help me if things go wrong;
 Someone who will occasionally but regularly look around;

Someone who breathes as much air as I do;
 Someone who is not a marathon swimmer;
 My best friend;
 Someone who won't stick to my side like glue;
 A good model who will do as they're told (!);
 No one.

There was more but I think you get the idea. Divers should not take the buddy system for granted. Divers need to be aware buddies may not be able to help, may not notice when their air is low, may not look for you, chase after you, communicate with you, and consequently, divers need to be prepared for any eventuality.

Diving is wonderful but it is also all about taking responsibility for yourself and, if you choose, for others. "If you cannot look after yourself how can you look after someone else". It isn't only in diving this cliché holds true.

Now to give you my tips to help you be great buddy.

How to be a great buddy

DEFINE YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Although safety is a key element in recreational diving, it need not take the joy out of your sport. You need to provide a margin of safety and then dive within your own comfort zone, defined by depth, time, activity and water conditions. Finding a buddy with a similar comfort zone is the ideal solution. Understanding the comfort zone of the less experienced diver takes precedence. (For example; a strong swimmer should slow his or her pace for a weaker swimmer rather than the other way round.) Although defining a common comfort zone may sometimes lead to a restriction for the more experienced buddy, by working together dives can be created to suit both divers. It is far better to discuss and agree on the dive profile before diving than to discover the differences during a dive!

SELECTING COMPATIBLE ACTIVITIES

This does not mean you always have to do the same thing, but it does mean your pursuits are compatible. A diver into macro-photography with a buddy who loves high speed drift diving are not going to get along! (No pun intended!) However, sightseeing and videography can definitely go hand in hand.

Compatibility also applies to diving skills: one buddy might be terrific at compass navigation while the other is better at natural navigation or one buddy might be brilliant at spotting tiny marine life while the other keeps their eyes peeled for the bigger 'stuff'. As long as you can communicate effectively, you will both benefit from diving together.

COMMUNICATION AND CO-OPERATION

Buddy diving should be a “team event” not a leader/follower scenario. A good buddy team has each others interests at heart and does not engage in dangerous competitions about who can go deeper, faster, breathe less etc.

Communication is important above and below the water. A co-operative buddy pair can abort a dive at any time and know their buddy will understand.

REDUCING STRESS

Diving with a known and trusted buddy reduces stress. If you have a buddy who makes you feel uncomfortable or anxious, get another one. Ideally buddy teams should know each other well, know each other’s comfort levels, likes and dislikes and care about each other!

INCREASING AWARENESS

Increased awareness of your own limits, your environment, and especially your buddy is an important step to being a great buddy.

Underwater, increased awareness does not start off as a “sixth sense”; it usually develops over time with slight touches, listening to sounds and brief sideways glances. Learn to know where your buddy is at any given time. If you have agreed to stay on the left side, do so, don’t make it harder than it needs to be.

The goal of these techniques is to reduce the possibility of separation while sharing the dive experience in the best and most relaxed way possible.

RESPONSIBILITY

Buddy diving is based on the concept of individual responsibility. By agreeing to be a buddy, you take on moral (and legal) obligations; to stay together, to help each other, to provide assistance in an emergency and to follow generally accepted safe diving practices to the best of your ability.

PLAN TOGETHER

I know you have heard it all before (or I would hope so) but a basic dive plan is the starting point, even if it is simply a verbal discussion and understanding. For more complicated or advanced dives a written plan is a must. Whether written or verbal, dive plans should include:

- a The reason for the dive, what do you wish to achieve (which may be simply to have a good time!);
- b The general direction to be taken and route of the dive;
- c Cut off points for depth, time, air or decompression; and

- d What to do in an emergency i.e. separation, equipment failure etc.

CHECK AND DOUBLE CHECK

Checking and double-checking is the only effective way to learn about each other’s equipment, frame of mind and the environment. The more you dive with the same person, the quicker and easier this becomes. As well as pre-dive checks, share dive experiences, talk about the dive after the dive, this helps notice any difficulties.

It does not matter what form of communication you use, hand signals, gestures or slates. Agree beforehand which to use and how. If you cannot communicate you might as well go home before going in the water.

KEEPING TOGETHER

Staying close to each other is an important key to being a great buddy. Visibility will dictate how close it is safe to be. Stay aware of each other’s location in relation to your own.

Brightly coloured or distinctive dive gear can help too. If you can recognise your partner immediately, you are less likely to lose them or to feel confused if a big crowd of divers swims past. If visibility becomes poor, holding hands works well or use a line to prevent separation.

AIR CONSUMPTION

Monitor each other’s air consumption. Always agree on what is the air pressure at which you the end of the dive. And remember, it does not matter who reaches the agreed mark first! Always aim to end your dive when you are down to 50 bar or even earlier. This allows for any surface problems and again, reduces stress.

Reference

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This is a reworked version of the paper “Two’s a Perfect Number? Says Who?” which appeared in Australian Scuba Diver 2000; September-October: 46-47.