

THE MODEL DIVER:

HOW PHOTOGRAPHERS AND MODELS WORK TOGETHER TO CREATE COMPELLING UNDERWATER IMAGERY

A camera has been part of my diving ensemble since my first giant stride almost 30 years ago. I was determined to find every mermaid, sea monster and lost city, and needed photographic evidence as proof. When I first started out, other divers were persona non grata when it came to the shots because I simply did not want them to detract from my cherished subjects.

These days I make a good portion of my living as an underwater photographer. Over time, I eventually came to understand that other divers, particularly well-positioned models, could add a dynamic element to my work, as well as more dollars to my bank account.

BY SCOTT AND LAUREN JOHNSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT JOHNSON





Photography is both science and art. Success is often determined as much by feel and timing as preparation and skill. The same goes for modeling. Photographers compose and capture. Models complement and create. Photographers set the stage or frame the scene. Models add dimension and

depth or star power, such as in fashion photography. A productive collaboration by a shooter and model is founded on communication, planning and anticipating one another's next move. Working in water and with wild animals only magnifies the challenges and the potential rewards.

The Human Element

Humans are funny creatures. Whether we're gazing at rows of gossip magazines lining grocery store checkouts or following our friends and favorite celebrities on social media websites, it's clear that people are generally infatuated with other people. By including one or more models in a shot, a photographer can accentuate the focal point. The viewer relates to the person in the photo, thinking, "I want to be there," or "I want to do that" or "I want to wear that." Models add drama and drama demands attention.

Eyes may or may not be windows to the soul, but eyes give soul to imagery. An image featuring a model's eyes focused on a marine creature while the animal's eyes are looking into the camera is powerful, conveys emotion and holds the viewer's attention. Shots like this aren't simply flukes; they're the result of a lot of work and coordination between photographer and model.

Just as important as the model is what the model is wearing. Here's where I'd like to offer that, for a variety of reasons, it's important for both the photographer and the model to be outfitted in scuba equipment that's appropriate for the diving environment. The model's gear should appear in good condition, fit properly and be colorful in order to add appeal to the imagery. When selecting a mask for modeling use, be sure to choose one with a clear silicone skirt. This is critically important, as a dark silicone mask will not allow light to reach a model's eyes in close-up shots as well as one made with clear silicone.

In general, models serve to enhance the awareness of a brand, product, service, business or message. They may also be employed to illustrate or reinforce an idea or action. I have partnered with numerous professional and delightful models over the years. Each of them possessed the essential ingredients that define a successful underwater model:

- Healthy level of physical fitness.
- Advanced diving skills.



This photo offers a perfect example of how a model can greatly enhance the composition of an image.

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When working with marine life, both the photographer and model must be respectful of the animal.

- Good communication skills.
- Patience (especially when working with me).
- Attentiveness.
- A creative, adventurous spirit.
- Passion for diving and the imaging process.

It's important that the photographer possess these same qualities, too. However, I must confess that I come up short on attentiveness. Because my focus is on finding, framing and shooting our targeted subjects, there are times when I am not the best dive buddy. My wife, Lauren, who is also my business partner and primary underwater model, compensates for my shortcoming by continually working to become a more self-reliant diver. Even though I may be paying more attention to my camera than

my dive buddy/model, we are not "pseudo solo" divers. We maintain fairly close proximity to one another and we have a standing agreement to end any shoot when either of us feels uncomfortable. This helps keep our tasks in proper perspective. There is never a time when we will put our own personal safety aside in order to get a shot. Surface intervals allow us to critique the previous dive and set our goals for the next one.

What ultimately makes our working together more productive and enjoyable are our ongoing opportunities to refine our techniques and our natural anticipation of one another's decisions and actions. Basically, our sustained relationship and experiences have made us better aquatic dance partners. Teamwork fuels the creative process

and supports every stage of the project, including planning and logistics (making sure all the right gear reaches a distant location can be one of the most challenging hurdles).

Fitness Factor

When fully geared up for diving even the most accomplished photographer and attractive model can resemble overburdened pack mules out of the water. And, though temporarily free of the cumbersome weight while submerged, she or he may have to endure strong currents, surge and extended swimming during a shoot. A week of making three to five dives each day can be physically draining even in mild conditions.

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In this photo the model helps enhance the scene because she illustrates the massive size of the sea fan.

advised to start by becoming a better diver. This includes getting in good cardiovascular shape for diving. Advanced diving skills, especially those pertaining to buoyancy, breath control and spatial awareness, will help you avoid making accidental contact with the reef, which can damage fragile ma-

rine creatures and cause silt that ruins shots. Silt is definitely not a photographer's friend, as the greater the silt, the more ridiculous the backscatter in any associated shot. When shooting, we tend to keep our distance from other divers for three reasons: 1. To limit the surrounding man-made noise and

activity, which might make creatures less prone to flee or hide. 2. To reduce the background clutter (unwanted divers or bubbles) in shots. 3. To avoid silt inadvertently stirred by other divers.

Breath control allows models to provide bubble-free shooting windows and helps photographers and models extend their working session together by using their respective air judiciously. By breath control — the emphasis is on control — not breath-holding. Excess bubbles can destroy a shot as thoroughly as a cloud of silt. In addition, a diver's bubbles are noisy and more likely to spook marine creatures. Breath control involves taking long, slow, deep breaths and timing respirations so that exhaled bubbles complement the shot rather than detract from it.

Like all talented models, Lauren can simultaneously focus on the camera, our subject, the environment, her dive computer, her dive light and, of course, her smile as she personifies the image of a relaxed and happy diver. Her finely tuned spatial awareness allows her to factor the artistic, environmental and safety aspects of each movement. While I provide general instructions for her to follow during the shooting sequence and then frame the scene through my viewfinder, I cannot orchestrate the intricacies of her movements in real time. It is relatively easy for me to remember to get close, shoot up and don't blow out the highlights. Lauren runs through a much longer mental checklist while playing her role as I capture the performance.

Communication Is Key

With so much to communicate between photographer and model, it's practically a no-brainer to say that good underwater communication skills are important. Many forms of communication are employed, including sign language, gestures and facial expressions, lip reading and using a slate. Misunderstandings and confusion can cost precious time, money and lost opportunities. Lauren and I

FROM A MODEL'S PERSPECTIVE

BY LAUREN JOHNSON

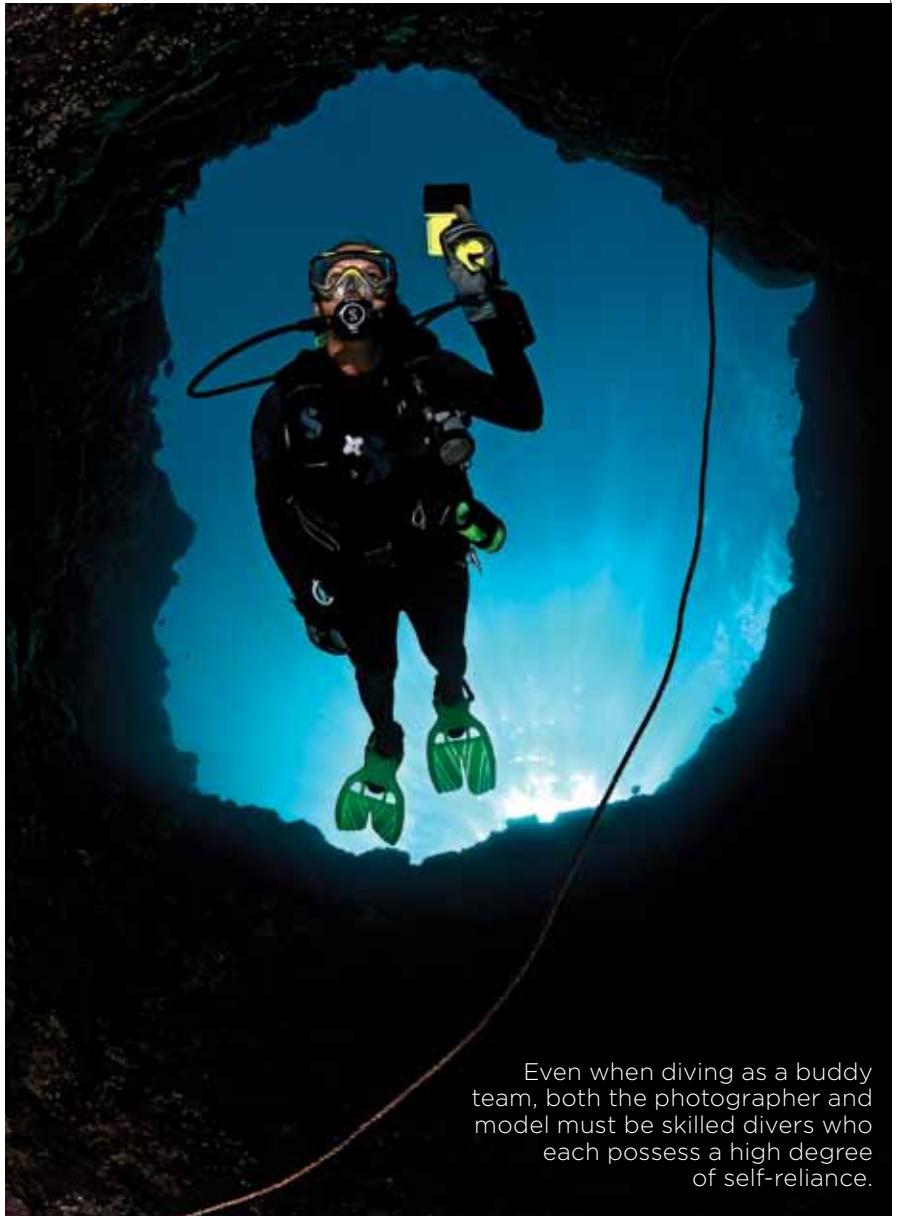
In the Disney Pixar animated movie, “A Bug’s Life,” Harry, the fly, is drawing ever nearer to the formidable and to him, lethal, bug zapper. His friend calls out to him, “No, Harry, no. Don’t look at the light.” The dome on Scott’s camera housing pointed in my direction is for me what the bug zapper is to Harry. I’m not supposed to look.

“Do not look directly at the camera,” is a seemingly simple imperative. Of course, like life, there are exceptions to this rule. You must look for directions from the shooter. The best photographers will guide the model into position. Knowing which direction to move and where you should look assists in framing the shot. Additionally, if I can see the dome, I can see a mirrored reflection. Let’s face it, mirrors help models! So peek, but don’t “look.” If your eyes are focused on the camera instead of the subject, it detracts from the visual effect of the photo. And, trust me, it can ruin an otherwise perfect shot. One exception to the “don’t look” policy is when the wide-angle lens is in play and the model is to appear as a silhouette in the blue background. This is when it’s acceptable to look directly at the camera. It’s helpful to use the dome port as a mirror as you check to see that your body position is lined up nicely for the shot.

Your mask is the framework for the billboard message, especially when shooting close-ups. Thus, mask flooding and fogging are not options for models. Before entering the water, I apply a thin layer of defog solution to the inside of the mask and let it sit for a few minutes before rinsing it in the same water in which I’ll be diving. Once my mask is in place,

I ask Scott to check for stray hairs along the perimeter of the seal, which could cause leaks. It’s easier to prevent a leaky mask before starting the dive than dealing with it underwater.

A photographer/model team is able to work together in tandem, a knowing expectation of the routine. That being said, I admit I must remind myself at times that he (I use this pronoun only



Even when diving as a buddy team, both the photographer and model must be skilled divers who each possess a high degree of self-reliance.

to reference Scott, my husband and wildlife photographer) is in charge of the shoot. As a word of advice, when you agree to act as the photographic subject for a photographer, it's a good idea to keep in mind that you have agreed to be there to supplement his or her creative aspirations. It's best to pack a lot of patience in your gear bag, because modeling can be a frustrating endeavor.

Scott already mentioned the importance of advanced diving skills, especially buoyancy control. I can't agree more or stress this enough. Make sure you are properly weighted and that your weight is trimmed to enable you to adjust your buoyancy by simply inhaling or exhaling slightly rather than adding or removing air from your buoyancy compensator (BC) during the dive. If you don't know how much weight you'll need for a particular gear configuration, it's very useful to take the time to do a pre-dive weight check. (This is good advice for every dive, but especially when you are attempting to model for a photographer.) I've found that many divers tend to dive with far more weight than they actually need. I dive with only a pound or two (0.45 or 0.9 kg) more weight than I'll need in order to achieve neutral buoyancy during the end of the dive when on a safety stop.

Like buoyancy control, breathing control is equally important. If you are in the picture, your photographer might prefer to get the shots while you are inhaling, so that there are no bubbles present in the shot. Practice taking long, slow inhalations, followed by relatively quick exhalations. This will give the photographer the advantage of shooting multiple frames without bubbles in the scene. I make a habit of exhaling just before getting into position for the shot, and inhaling during the shooting sequence. If I am doing a close-up, like a mask on an anemone, I will turn my head or carefully back away for a moment to release the bubbles so as not to create extra particles into the picture, and quickly resume the pose. As you and your photographer work together, you might find that you begin to time your breathing cycles in synch with one another, which can be very helpful when composing pleasing shots. There is nothing as infuriating from a model perspective as being ready, ready, ready ... can't wait any longer ... big exhalation and FLASH. Grr....

The Model as the Co-Creator

Some of my most enjoyable dives are when I'm not only posing, but also helping to choreograph the shot. I see a potential picture and convey it to the photographer. On our most recent trip to the Red Sea, a plate coral begged to be used as a throne in the underwater castle found while diving Malahi. We played with a variety of poses, including floating, but not touching, just above the plate holding my fins like I was sitting. It created an artistically fun shot. Where Scott has a talent for capturing wildlife through the lens, I may see shots he would otherwise overlook. At other times, I may suggest taking a picture of something like an indigo hamlet on a barrel sponge. I found it on a dive in Honduras, and Scott captured the beauty of the moment (which he at first balked at, I might

add ;-)). And, of course, I'm there to assist in finding the designated species of a previously discussed shoot list.

Having an idea of what is specific to local waters increases the ability to capture endemic species. After most dives I will peruse the identification books. I usually list the names of the species photographed as well as identify other creatures. The more I look at the book, the more I am able to locate the "rare" finds. I always did enjoy scavenger hunts. Using a tank banger, I will get the photographer's attention to point out the potential subject. The tank banger is a double-edged sword for the photographer. If not shooting, they are wonderful for redirection. However, if they are shooting a gray moray and you are pointing to scorpionfish, you may experience a lack of enthusiasm at your find. So be it. Just smile and keep looking for the next photo opp.

People say we are blessed to be able to work and travel together, and that we make our living "going on vacation." It's true, but ultimately work is work and bills have to be paid. We're each on assignment to do a specific job that will enhance our collaborative effort.

Not every photographer/model team will approach their diving as seriously as we do. However, we hope that by sharing what we've learned along the way, those of you who aspire to collaborate as photographer and photo subject will have a safe, fun and productive time with underwater photography.

A model can add a sense of scale and drama to the scene, such as in the wreck photo shown here.





YOUR SMILING EYES

Supermodel Tyra Banks coined the word “smize,” which means to smile with your eyes. Yes, model, it is your job to “smize.” It might seem silly at first, especially since you’ve got a regulator in your mouth and a mask on your face, but one of the best ways a human subject can enhance an underwater image is by flashing a bright-eyed, happy-face smile.

BARRY AND RUTH GUMBELLOT PHOTO

use a variety of hand signals for such things as:

- Subject targeted.
- Proximity to subject (close-up or silhouette).
- Whether to approach the subject.
- Where to look.
- Body angle.
- Position in the water column.
- Dive light on or off.
- End of shoot.

We spend a considerable amount of pre-dive time visualizing the shots we’d like to create, and how we’ll communicate with one another to get the images on our shot list.

Time spent talking about how we’ll communicate without words underwater helps avoid one of us getting frustrated and using a “middle-finger salute” while on a dive. This particular hand signal does not promote a peaceful working environment and may significantly reduce a model or photographer’s enthusiasm for continuing a shoot. If you know what I mean....

Models, Not Divas or Dive Gods

Above all, an underwater imaging team must embody an adventurous spirit and a passion for diving, marine life and the imaging process. Exotic, tropical locations can certainly be nice perks, but the behind-the-scene activities look, feel and smell a lot like, well, work. Limited resources, cramped accommodations, fluctuating schedules and ever-approaching deadlines dictate we blend a “go with the flow” attitude with a vigilant awareness of the project goals. As visitors in foreign lands, we need the assistance of locals to achieve our objectives. Travel has taught us humility, appreciation and perspective.

Even if you’re just out for a day of fun taking photos that include a model, which aren’t intended to grace the cover of a magazine, diva or dive god attitudes do little to add to the fun — and have been known to wreck an otherwise good time.

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