Should Diver Certification Be Forever?

Diving is fun. Diving is deadly. Training and experience make the difference. So what do you think?

TEXT BY BRETT GILLIAM

The deal in diving is that you're certified for life upon successful completion of a recognized SCUBA training program. There's no requirement to renew that wallet card they give you because it doesn't expire. There's no obligation to take any 'refresher' training beyond the initial course. Hey, you don't even have to continue diving. Once you're in, you're in. Ours is a pretty easy club to join and it comes with lifetime membership.

It's been this way since training agencies began offering certifications back in the 1950s, and more than 60 years later the qualification process remains unchanged. Instructors, assistant instructors, and divemasters are required to renew annually, pay dues to an agency, buy insurance, complete continuing education courses, and show legitimate evidence of diving activity and student training. But if you're in the ranks of the everyday diver no such requirements exist and, in accordance with industry protocol, you can continue to dive simply by producing that original C-card. Seems like a helluva deal... but is it a good idea in the real world of diving today?

It's a sensitive subject in our sport and having been asked to offer my thoughts on it, I will be opening a can of worms that few seem inclined to do. Ah well, it reminds me of the controversy that arose when I advocated for the acceptance of nitrox, diving computers, technical diving and rebreathers, nearly 25 years ago. I was branded as the anti-Christ then by diving's arch-conservatives and I suspect they will be preparing a fresh
cross to nail me upon once they read this little epistle. If it comes to that at least I'll be able to look down on my crucifiers. There's a Monty Python skit in this somewhere. Think Life of Brian with me in the lead role.

Cooperative Effort
Let's take an objective look at the situation. First of all, I don't have a simple answer because it's a multifaceted issue that can be successfully addressed only if there's industry-wide cooperation among all the stakeholders. That shouldn't be an insurmountable obstacle but the diving industry does not have a shining record of unity and cooperation when it comes to dealing positively with practical and timely change that recognizes technology, geopolitical advance, and the evolution of diving practices. In my long experience I have seen the industry bury its head in the sand, time and again. Embracing change is rarely easy but when the benefits are obvious, leaders have a responsibility to lead the way forward and in early days that can mean taking the hard stand in a controversy. It's the job, so I say deal with it.

Anyone active in diving through the past 25 years can quickly target examples of what I'm talking about here. One was the almost decade-long war waged against Nitrox. Another revolution centered on acceptance of digital cameras. Today, both are mainstream, but not because industry leaders did their job. The diving public was a whole lot smarter and simply moved forward while many constitute members of the Diving Equipment and Marketing Association watched from the sidelines and then played catch-up.

Last year this magazine asked me to write an article about the effectiveness of instruction in diving today (DIVER Volume 38 Number 8) and whether training agencies were getting the job done educating and qualifying divers. I put forward pros and cons. I was critical of meaningless specialty certifications, some of which did not even require diving, and I argued against issuing Advanced Diver Certs to people with as few as nine open water dives...in their lives: four dives in entry-level training and five more in the 'advanced' course. 'C'mon, does this make any sense? Want a 'shark diver' specialty? No problem...do a day of diving observing dive guides feed reef sharks. You want the 'underwater photographer' specialty? Easy...do one day of diving with a point and shoot rental and join David Doubilet and Ernie Brooks in the image artistry hall of fame. The list goes on. Question is, do these make you a better and more proficient diver? I say no. Far more time, study and practice are required for any meaningful level of proficiency, which should be the end result of a training program, not merely another badge for the jacket sleeve or card for the wallet.

The Good, the Bad and...
Many divers get certified and go on to become active for years. Their enthusiasm takes them to many dive destinations at home and abroad, where they're exposed to currents, poor visibility, boat diving, deeper diving on walls, wrecks, even in caves, and through this activity they develop practical experience that builds confidence and competence. Some may also take additional training along the way. These divers become capable through participation and reach the point where they do not need supervision or control. These divers are not a problem.

Refresher courses have been out there for a long time, but they're not mandatory. Maybe they should be.

But others get that initial certification, maybe even two or three during those early days of enthusiasm, but then don't dive much for whatever reason. Skills and situational awareness lapse and degrade without use. Equipment and technique move forward and they miss those evolutions due to their inactivity. Ironically, advances designed to make diving easier can actually become a problem for the uninformed. A case in point is the popularity of weight-integrated buoyancy compensators and how this improvement can challenge a diver trained (no so long ago) to use a BCD and weight belt separately. In a stressful situation where ditching your weight may be required, there's no room for confusion. Divers have died simply because they did not know how to ditch integrated weights.

But now the naysayers cry foul, pointing out that many industry operators require divers to declare their recent experience on a form or produce a logbook. This is good in theory and even in practice, but it doesn't always work. Some customers holding their C-card 'for life' don't have a problem fudging a declaration or 'pencil-whipping' a logbook to serve the occasion. If you doubt this, just ask a resort dive master or California boat crew if they've ever had to deal with divers that looked good on paper but demonstrated serious deficiencies the moment they jumped in the water. That's life in the real world and it can be a bitch. Good old ego; small word, big problem. Most don't want to admit a personal deficiency among his or her peers even though misrepresentation can be fatal in our sport. And the record indicates accident rates are up dramatically, but no one wants to admit it.

The industry can fix its certification system. We certainly don't want government intervention. Bureaucrats would be more hindrance than help and, inevitably, the oversight would cost us all more money in taxes and fees. And they'd still get it wrong. Sport diving is a self-regulated industry and it behooves us to review and revise protocols that serve the greater good by taking into account the active and inactive divers who make up the global diving population.

New Rules
So what would a new system look like? What regulations, what guidelines are needed to ensure a diver holding a legitimate C-card is proficient and not a liability, not least to himself or herself. Well, it's not overly complicated. Evaluation and updated training are fundamental. Refresher courses have been out there for a long time, but they're not mandatory. Maybe they should be. Common sense more than business sense is key in this consideration. But business plays into this, of course, so brace yourself, there may be a strong argument that diving certifications come with an expiry date, renewal contingent on demonstrated knowledge and ability.

"Ouch", they've just nailed my arm to the cross but the Centurion is all smiles because this keeps his crucifixion specialty current. He's also got a 'chariot' patch on his uniform, earned from a weekend race with Ben somebody or other a few years back. He tells me the racing proved too stressful so he dropped out, but the qualification remains, and he even offered to take me for a spin around the track...if I made it through the resurrection. We exchanged cell phone numbers.

But I digress. This business of updating the certification process will not be pretty.

As I've said, it won't work without cooperation at every level of the industry. Initial resistance will likely argue that any system more demanding of proficiency will adversely affect equipment sales,
reduce dive travel bookings and curtail dive consumer spending in general. If the kind of change I'm writing about here is not well thought-through, and if the rollout is not carefully executed, then the bottom line could very well take a hit. But a common sense plan effectively marketed and phased in would work to stimulate sales and strengthen the industry.

Experienced active divers are not the target audience, as I've said. Even weekend warriors who make one dive trip a year to an easy dive Caribbean destination don't show up in my sniper scope. Those affected by a revitalized training regime are all the certified people who vanished from sight soon after they received their C-cards. These are the ones to identify and entice back into the fold. It would be worth the effort because this is a very big crowd.

The drop out rate in diving is high. You can argue about it all you want, and some do, but the painful truth is that attrition is in the order of 70 percent. How do you build a business model when a significant majority of your original customers choose to stop participating? Simple. You don't.

New Strategies

So how do we win over all these lapsed divers? Here's an idea. Provide a refresher dive and knowledge update program at no charge. Crazy, huh? Or is it? Do you think the initiative would bring business through the door? The price is right, and with skills and interest refreshed these people would become customers. Divers who are not confident in their underwater ability, who haven't been diving, are not buying wet suits and dry suits, regulators, BCs, cameras, systems, diving computers. They're not even shelling out a few bucks for basic mask, fins and snorkel. And if they aren't buying the basics, they certainly aren't paying for exotic trips to Indonesia, the Solomon, or Cocos Island. A free course becomes the gateway to reinvigorating the diving interest that can then add an entirely new dimension of fun to a vacation in the Bahamas or Caribbean, and it's a reasonable bet that the renewed diver won't be traveling alone.

Done properly, a re-entry program makes the previously-trained diver a customer once again and offers the added bonus of enticing his or her spouse or children into the sport. Undoubtedly there are a good many superannuated divers out there from the 1970s and 1980s with grown children, and who would be attracted to the sport again now that they are empty nesters. And just as many divers from the 90s and into the new millennium, whose kids haven't yet left home, are out there too, and for them the idea of introducing sport diving to the family would be an attractive idea.

Best Before Date

Reintroducing inactive divers to the sport is one initiative. Ideally, we need to be proactive in a way that prevents diver dropout in the first place. One preventive measure could be to offer a C-card that comes with an expiry date and a re-certification, or renewal process all laid out for easy access and completion. This would improve safety, spur sales, and stimulate diver interest. Face it, inactive divers have largely dropped out and moved on to other activities. One thing is for sure: They're not customers in any local dive shop.

But that can change.

A tactful pitch reminding them of the fun diving offers can pay off. To my mind the best way to keep people involved is to emphasize the social side of diving. Get them together at a film night, a meet and greet BBQ, where a good time is promised at the event itself, and into the future for those motivated to take the refresher course and remain active. I said earlier that this course could be offered at no charge. That will be an attractive proposition to any consumer. But if you charge a nominal amount, that can work too. Marketers will tell you that it's much easier to keep a customer than it is to find a new one. It makes sense to be scheduling events that target lapsed divers. For many of them the interest is dormant only because life gets in the way. Sure, some have moved on, but not all and when shown a way to get involved again, these re-certifying divers will spend money on gear and travel too.

And here's the kicker: diving really is so much easier to enjoy nowadays. On every level the sport has advanced. Gear design is a huge piece of this; it's actually comfortable now. Camera gear is getting smaller and better and very affordable, and no matter how bad you are at photography, you can now come home with decent photos of every dive. And if you haven't been on a diving vacation for a while, I'm here to tell you that the experience awaiting you out there is extraordinary. Live aboard boats are luxurious beyond anything you can imagine. Land-based resorts are similarly well-appointed and the level of diving service from dock to dive site puts a scuba holiday right up there with the best vacation experience you can buy.

What you don't want to do is present requalification in a demeaning or patronizing manner.

It's all in sales technique. It's all about customer service. Putting on a 'scuba police' hat is not the way to go. A popular Caribbean dive destination tried this in the early 1990s by banning dive computers, outlawing nitrox, mandating absurd depth limits, and making all divers, regardless of experience, dive under the supervision of divemasters. Most qualified divers just said the hell with that and moved on to more accommodating vacation locales, of which they were plenty. And there's even more to choose from today.

Wake Up Call

Previously I referenced the diver dropout rate. At 70 percent it's unacceptably high, which begs the question: how did it get there? What exactly is it that leads a diver to drop out? A key reason is training that does not adequately qualify them to get out there and enjoy diving on a regular basis. At the core of this problem is confidence, or more to the point, its absence in many newly certified divers. If a recently minted diver just doesn't feel that he or she is 'ready and able' after completing online academics and brief pool and open water dives, then they soon become an attrition statistic. That has to be fixed.

Similarly, many divers will move on to something else if they have a stressful experience soon after their course supervision is complete. This is also about personal confidence. Perhaps their open water training took place in a quarry or a lake or the tropics, even an aquarium tank, where water conditions are passive. They complete a few short dives in this kind of environment. They're certified and told that they are now qualified divers. But when they get a scare in the surf or a current takes them for a ride, that fright can be all it takes to push them into tennis or golf. Scare the you-know-what out of people and the only thing you get in return is that rental wetsuit smelling bad.

The industry needs to wake up. The sport is shrinking. There are too many unnecessary accidents. Frankly, a good many of them simply would not have happened in the 'old days' when divers
underwent more rigorous training. Today's courses cover the necessary information but students are not getting the practical experience they need, in my opinion.

And there's no doubt in my mind that this is integral to the alarmingly high dropout rate. I believe there should be more emphasis on basic training and I also think that some of the nonsensical specialty ratings could be done away with to no one's detriment.

I understand that specialty courses generate cash flow and I have no issue with new divers enrolling in them to acquire knowledge and skills that improve their diving experience. But these courses should be more thorough, last longer and, yes, it would be entirely reasonable to charge more for a course that's more substantive. In basic training, more dives under supervision, where a minor crisis is turned into a positive learning experience, is a good thing. I submit that this teaching model effectively eliminates, at least diminishes, the fear or threat arising in a suit-slinging freak-out that can hastily terminate a budding and potentially life-long involvement in scuba diving. And for want of that relatively small amount of additional supervised experience that I advocate for, that incident can lose 

...they will be preparing a fresh cross to nail me upon once they read this little epistle

experience to be competent and capable of independent diving.

But this approach is recommended only, not mandatory. Many divers opt out of this ongoing instruction system because they think they are more qualified than they actually are, which can lead to trouble. Remember the 'advanced' diver who could have as few as nine dives and still qualify for this rating? Ridiculous? Yes. Even dangerous if the diver actually buys into the belief that he or she is now advanced.

Effecting the change that I believe is required won't be easy and it will require creative solutions that a unified industry can devise. It will be good for business and that's the bottom line. Simple really, bottom time increases the bottom line. A Vulcan mind-meld of divers and bean counters should do it! Spock would say, "It's only logical." [ ]

www.divermag.com 45