

On Your Own: The Buddy System Rebutted

By Bob Halstead

Buddies are not essential for a safe dive. On the contrary, buddies often increase the risk of a dive, either directly through unpredictable or unreliable actions, or indirectly, through an unfounded belief that security is enhanced by numbers alone, regardless of the training or state of mind of the buddy. In most instances, a competent solo diver would be much safer than the average buddy dive.

Most textbooks do not define the buddy system - an interesting point in itself. I define it as the situation that occurs when two divers of similar interests and equal experience and ability share a dive, continuously monitoring each other throughout entry, the dive, and the exit, and remaining within such distance that they could render immediate assistance to each other if required.

Obviously, this definition represents the ideal, and upon honest examination it's clear that it has little to do with the reality as practiced by most divers. The truth is that on most dives, the buddy system fails.

I've been an active diving instructor for 20 years, and a professional sport diver for 13 years; I've made over 5,000 dives and have personally supervised - without serious incident - over 90,000 dives. During this time I've seen buddies that were incompatible either through interest or ability; buddies that spent their dives looking for each other; divers dependant on their buddies; divers who claimed to be buddies on the boat, but who ignored each other in the water; buddies who failed to communicate; buddies who fought in the midst of a dive; and divers who failed to recognize distress in a buddy, let alone attempt to assist.

This last situation brings up a vital point. The buddy system implies that divers will be able to recognize a problem with their buddy and do something about it. Most are never put to the test, but experience indicates that if they were, many would fail. An analysis of diving fatalities in Australia and New Zealand over the past ten years found that 45% of the fatalities involved buddies who were separated *by* the fatal problem or who were separated *after* the problem commenced. Another 14% stayed with the buddy, but the buddy died anyway. Just being together is not enough.

From these observations, I've concluded that the buddy system is mostly mythical. It is unreasonable, unworkable, unfathomable, and unnatural. Rarely - very rarely - I see a couple who buddy dive as the ideal. In my view, most diving today is, in fact, solo diving, even if the divers claim to be buddy diving. Unfortunately, because it is taboo, most divers have had no specific training to qualify them for such solo diving.

How did we get ourselves into this mess? I am told that the "never dive alone" rule originated with the YMCA "never swim alone" program that was popular when dive instructor agencies were just getting going in the late 1950s. Why has the rule stayed with diving? Undoubtedly because people are nervous about being out of their natural breathing element and at the mercy of the monsters of the deep. Fear

is the motivation for the buddy system. Divers do not want to be eaten. There is nothing strange in this fear; what is strange is the response to it: get a buddy. There is an old joke that the buddy system reduces the chance of getting eaten by 50%. Regrettably, the divers that repeat this joke are often serious. Instead of finding out about real behavior of marine creatures, or developing fail-safe scuba gear and a back-up breathing system, the diving community has opted for the comfort of having a buddy. Many divers choose a buddy simply because they are alarmed at being alone, and not because there is a possibility of the buddy actually assisting in an emergency.

Unfortunately, few people defending the buddy system seem to address the critical point of whether it does, in fact, make diving safer as intended. Since the introduction of the buddy system 30 years ago, a large body of divers has developed who have made careers out of sport diving. These people must now look to their experience to decide whether or not the buddy system has worked, or whether it should be modified or even abandon.

Analysing Dive Risk

All diving involves risk. As soon as you step near a full scuba cylinder you are at risk. And every step that you take getting on and into the water increases your risk. In fact, there is an escalating scale of risk as dives become more complex. In general, the risk of a certain dive is a function of the technical requirements of the dive and the environmental conditions. It has nothing to do with the diver.

In theory, we should be able to grade every dive for its risk factor. However, this is difficult in practice. Though many cave dive have been graded, ocean dives are another matter. Ocean conditions, being variable, may make a dive low-risk one day and high-risk the next. Nevertheless, an accurate assessment of the risk factor for any dive must be made before the dive is attempted. This is why experience is so valuable. and why risk assessment is a critical duty of dive masters and instructors.

The actual danger posed by any particular dive depends on three factors: first, the dive itself - the risk factor; second, the diver attempting the dive - the skills available to overcome the risk; and third, the buddy - the wild card - who may make the dive less or *more* dangerous.

Safe diving occurs when the diver's skills, experience, and knowledge match or exceed the skill, experience, and knowledge requirements of the dive. For instance, diving shallower than 30 feet in calm, clear, warm water devoid of marine life qualifies as low-risk. Yet such dive could be dangerous if the diver does not understand the consequences of breath-holding on ascent. Similarly, a dive to 200 feet in dark, cold water with a strong current is undoubtedly a high-risk dive, but one that can be made safely if the diver has the appropriate abilities and back-up. Professional divers make these kinds of dives all the time.

Of course, judging the danger of a dive is more a matter of probabilities than absolutes. A dangerous dive is one where it is *likely* that an injury will occur, a safe dive where it is *unlikely* - *but not impossible* - that an injury will occur. The point is that a high-risk dive - one that is deeper, longer, colder, rougher, involves

penetration of a wreck or a cave, encounters a current, involves dangerous marine animals, or is difficult to enter or exit from - need not be dangerous if the diver can identify the risk factors and overcome them with disciplined diver education and training.

We must also realize that there is no such thing as a completely safe dive. Nobody knows all the physiological risks associated with diving. In addition, many marine phenomena - as well as many buddies - are unpredictable. A safe diver is one who is able to assess the risk factors accurately and has a sober knowledge that his or her ability is sufficient to overcome these risks.

The crucial question in the debate between buddy diving and solo diving is how does the buddy affect the safety of the dive? Does he or she effectively add to the natural risk of the dive or reduce the risk of the dive? This obviously depends on the buddy. In many instances it would be safer to dive alone. For instance, many instructors would agree that it would be safer for them to be alone than with a student on a training dive.

The one remaining piece of the puzzle is to determine how being alone, *per se*, affects the risk of a dive. That is, does the buddy play an essential role in the dive? Is it possible to make a dive without a buddy and survive? Clearly, while we cannot survive a dive for more than a few minutes without a functioning regulator and a tank of air, we can certainly survive without a buddy.

Then what role does the buddy actually play? Theoretically, the buddy acts as a kind of safety factor. He is not essential, but has the purpose of preventing problems by recognizing them in the dive partner and stopping their development or effecting a rescue. Therefore, being alone does not affect the natural risk of the dive, but it does deprive the diver of a possible safety factor.

However, it is equally true that, although an ideal buddy might provide a safety factor, a less-than-ideal buddy might actually constitute an additional risk factor.

Dangerous Buddies

Let's examine some scenarios in which the buddy system makes diving more dangerous:

1. *The dependent diver.* This is the diver who depends on the buddy for vital information during the dive. Such divers are all too common. The dependent diver lets the buddy do the navigating, or keep an eye on the depth, or determine the safety stop, or even set his gear up for him. When he gets separated from his buddy, he is unable to cope, especially if he is afraid of being alone. The dependent diver is a direct consequence of the buddy system, and without it he would not exist.
2. *The psychological support syndrome.* Two inexperienced divers have paid for a dive trip but when they arrive at the dive site the conditions are worse than they have experienced before. Not wanting to let each other down, and boosting each other with comforting words, they attempt a dive of too high a risk level for their skills. Now they have to cope not only with the dive, but with each other. A solo diver can choose to abort a dive without affecting anyone else.

3. *The angry diver.* A diver really keen for a dive after a difficult week at the office gets buddied with someone who spends half the dive on the descent lines pointing to his ears and going up and down. The rest of the dive the buddy is seething with frustration and primed for disaster if a problem occurs. A solo diver blames only him or herself for any dive difficulties.
4. *The untrained diver.* As mentioned earlier, divers are often, in reality, diving alone even if they have a buddy, yet very few are trained for it. They spend hours in the pool practicing buddy and octopus breathing - which are very soon forgotten - and not enough time on individual survival skills such as weight belt control, buoyancy control, solo ascents, self-rescue, and skin diving (I happen to believe that a far better rule for safe diving than "never dive alone" is "never dive deeper than twice the depth you can skin dive to"). A solo diver has every incentive to perfect his diving skills.
5. *The falsely confident diver.* Some divers actually believe that they will be able to communicate with their buddies in an emergency and that their buddy will be able to assist them. Underwater communication with that pathetic set of hand signals is a bad joke, and the divers most likely to be able to recognize problems and do something about it are experienced divers - the ones who are least likely to get into trouble. I have made two life-saving underwater rescues. In both cases, I rescued someone else's buddy. The other divers failed to recognize the problems and do anything about them.
6. *The high-flying diver.* This guy has gone hang gliding, parachuting, rock climbing, kayaking rapids, and flies a stunt plane. He takes up diving, is a natural, and thinks it's the most wonderful thing he has ever done. Then he finds that he is not allowed to pursue this by himself. So he develops the technique of getting a buddy. losing him as soon as possible during the dive, then having a great dive by himself. [Ed. note: women usually have more sense.] A solo diver does not have a buddy to lose.

In spite of all the failings of the buddy system as currently practiced, I believe buddies do have a place in diving. In fact, they are essential. But the buddy's place is not in the water with you, it is looking out from the boat or from the shore while you dive. Most diving incidents occur at the surface; the surface is surely the most dangerous place. Yet, divers who would not dream of diving alone think nothing of leaving an empty anchored boat.

Buddy for Pleasure, Not Safety

Some of the most wonderful moments in my life have been when I have been alone in the ocean surrounded by its creatures - just me and nature. I treasure those moments and aim to have many more of them. I'm a very careful diver; I dive just about every day and test myself regularly with 60- to 70-foot skin dives. And I dive alone with the crew of my boat keeping a sharp lookout. However, sometimes I am

able to share great ocean experiences with special people, and this can be wonderful too. But these divers are other independent divers.

For safety, all divers should be completely independent and focus their energy on keeping themselves out of trouble. For joy, share your dive with another independent diver. For training, dive with an instructor until you are ready to be independent in the conditions that you aim to dive in.

The buddy system is not essential for a safe dive since there are other ways of proving the same safety factor, such as carrying back-up breathing systems and gauges, improving diving skills, and diving well within one's limits. But if you do decide to dive with a buddy, it is vitally important that you are certain that the buddy will be a safety factor during the dive and not an additional risk factor. Any buddy is not safer than no buddy.

I believe that all divers should be trained primarily as self-sufficient - solo - divers. They must learn to take personal responsibility for their actions in the water. If they are not capable of this, then they should still be in the care of an instructor. Once they are capable divers, if they then wish to share their dive with another independent diver that they trust, that is excellent. But the present hypocrisy that states that solo diving is unsafe while paying lip service to a buddy system that is so obviously failing is retarding the development of diving and increasing its danger needlessly.

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