



Text by Simon Pridmore

You must walk before you can run, so why do so few dive centres teach people how to swim before they learn to dive?

Something I try to do in my series of scuba books is identify and discuss disconnects between expectations and reality in scuba diving today. In other words, I address gaps between what non-divers, new divers and even experienced divers expect from dive professionals and what the professionals actually deliver.

A good example of a diving disconnect is the issue of basic watermanship.

The swim test

In the early days of scuba diving, most of the people who signed up for courses were ocean people. They were beach-goers, water sports enthusiasts, sailors, underwater hunters or ex-military folk. One thing they had in common was that they

were all swimmers and comfortable in the water. The swim test that was, and still is, a mandatory part of a beginner's scuba class was trivial and hardly necessary. The instructors would just tell the students

what they had to do and leave them to it, while they prepared the equipment for the more important bits of the course. It was conducted on an honour basis. Nobody counted laps or timed the floats.

Everybody could do it, so why bother? From a professional point of view, not much has changed today. The swimming test is still just given cursory attention and dispensed with right at the beginning of

the first pool session. Instructors, clubs and dive centres take the attitude that nobody in their right mind would sign up for a dive course if they could not already swim, and swim well. They certainly do

Scuba Confidential:

The Swimming / Diving Disconnect

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opinion

not see it as their job to teach people to swim. Most scuba instructors are not qualified swimming teachers anyway, a fact that might surprise people outside the dive industry. Also, over the years, as basic diver training courses have become shorter, the watermanship element has been reduced. The emphasis is completely on teaching students to handle the equipment and ticking skills checkboxes.



Swimming



Swimming skills today

However, watermanship standards among people who sign up to learn to dive these days are very different than what they used to be. In Asia, where scuba diving is booming, especially among young adults, there is no real tradition of children being taught to swim or families going to the beach on vacation. Most of the people that sign up to learn to scuba dive are far from being water babies. Many, in fact, cannot swim at all. I use Asia as an example, but the problem is universal.

Why do people who can't swim or swim poorly sign up

for scuba diving lessons? One might think that a basic human self-preservation instinct would ensure that this does not happen. But, herein lies the disconnect in expectations. Many non-divers assume that, if they need to be able to swim or to be good swimmers in order to scuba dive safely, then they will be taught to swim as part of the course. When this doesn't happen, they conclude that divers don't actually need to swim very well because they have the equipment to support them in the water. Thus, they become entirely dependent on this equipment to keep them alive

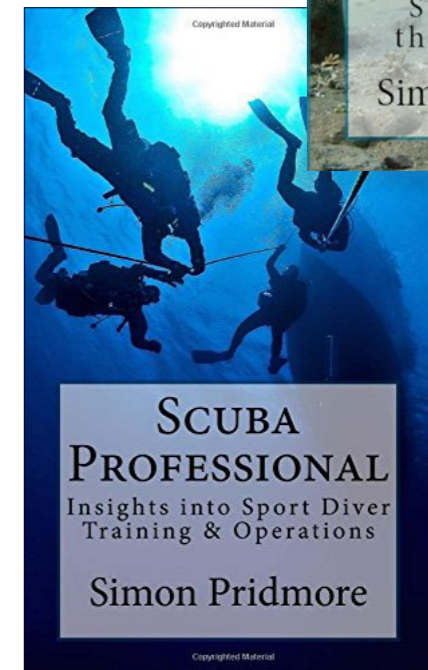
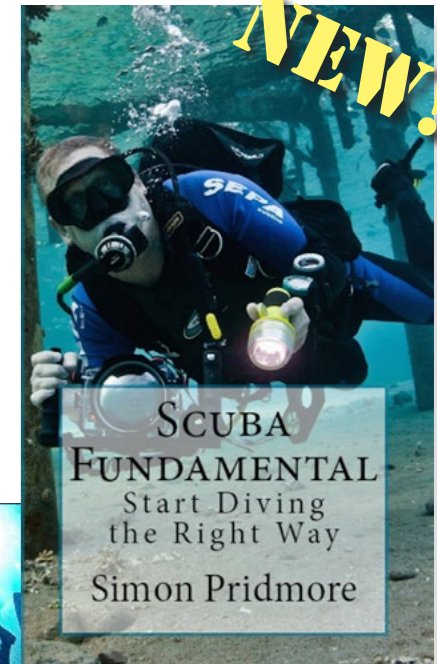
both underwater and on the surface, and are at enormous risk of drowning if it fails: which, of course, at some point it will.

Self-deception

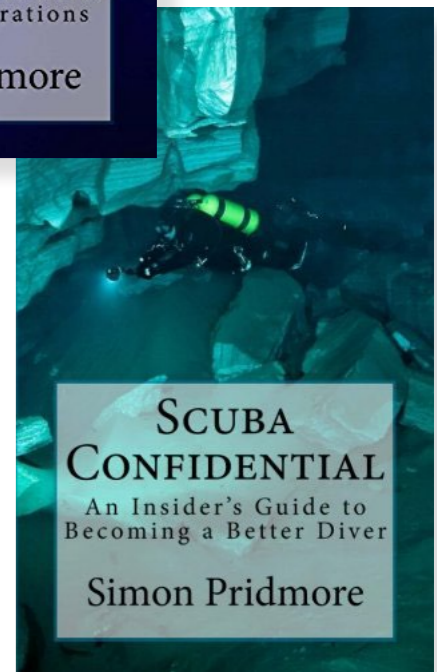
All over the world, many non-swimmers and very poor swimmers become certified scuba divers. For this to happen, a considerable degree of deception and self-deception must be involved. The swim and float test requirements on the course must either be waived by the instructor or faked in some way by the student. Or, perhaps, they both tacitly conspire in the mythology that it does not matter.

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Everyone involved in bringing new divers into the sport must notice this trend. You might expect that they would be concerned and do something about it. However, this is extremely rare.

Swimming instruction

A swimming coach badge makes an excellent additional string to any instructor's bow. It means that if the instructor has a student diver who does not swim well, they have the skills to fix the problem, instead of closing one eye and moving on, or kicking the student out of the course. After all, quite apart from the benefit to the student, it is also in the professionals' interest that new divers be comfortable in the water. They are easier to teach, they learn more quickly and they are more likely to become long-term customers rather than open water dropouts.

With qualified swimming instructors on the staff, a dive centre or resort can offer general watermanship classes as well as diving classes, helping people learn to swim or become more at ease in the water. This gives the dive centre a wider customer base, brings more people into the store and exposes non-divers to scuba diving. As they became better swimmers and lose any fears of the water they may have had, diving classes represent a natural progression, so the dive centre's core business grows as well.

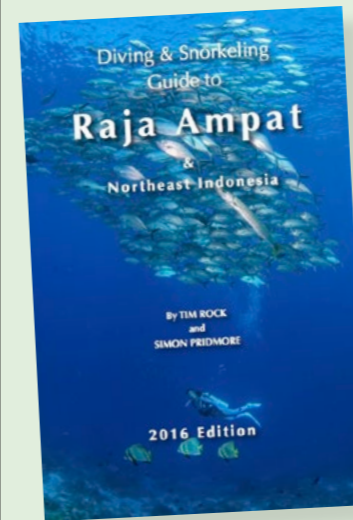
This just seems to make so much common sense. It is hard to imagine why so few dive centres do it and why so few instructors learn to teach swimming as well as diving.

Final note: In this article, I do generalise. I know that there are instructors and dive centres all over the world that offer swim-

ming lessons, but they are in the minority. The case I am making here is that it should be normal that dive operators offer this service rather than exceptional. ■

Simon Pridmore is the author of the international bestsellers, Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver, Scuba Professional: Insights into Sport Diver Training and Operations and Scuba Fundamental: Start Diving the Right Way. He is also the co-author of the Diving and Snorkeling Guide to Bali and Raja Ampat and the Diving and Snorkeling Guide to Northeast Indonesia, as well as a new adventure travelogue called Under the Flight Path. This article is adapted from a chapter in Scuba Professional. For more information, please visit the author's website at: SimonPridmore.com.

New Dive Guide to Raja Ampat



As part of their series of 2016 Diving and Snorkeling Guides, authors Tim Rock and Simon Pridmore have produced a brand new guide to Raja Ampat and Northeast Indonesia.

Diving or snorkeling in this remote region at the edge of the Pacific Ocean is a life-affirming, bucket-list-topping experi-

ence! Abundantly rich in marine life, these seas are proving to be a gift for divers that keeps on giving. Raja Ampat is the superstar destination, but other areas such as Cenderawasih Bay, Triton Bay and Southwest Halmahera are shining brightly too and acquiring similarly mythical status.

This richly illustrated, detailed and informative guide is the first to cover all of these incredible places! It tells and shows you—the adventurous travelling diver—what to expect from this remote, fascinating and often downright astonishing part of the world. It will help you plan your trip, enhance your experience when you get there and provide you with the best possible souvenir of your visit. Available on Amazon.com



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