

Handicapped Scuba Association

1981
to
2001

Celebrating 20
years of service

By Jasmine Boyd

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NAUI
DIVING ASSOCIATION

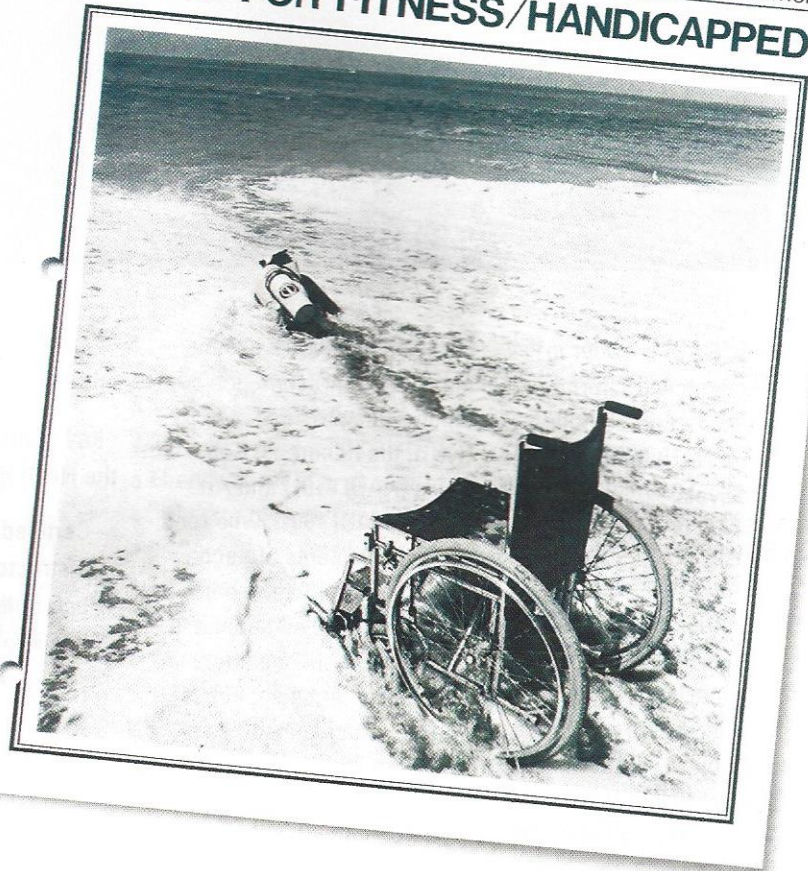
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“Scuba diving is the most exciting thing I’ve ever done!” It’s a statement Jim Gatacre, Founder and President of the Handicapped Scuba Association has heard many times over the past 20 years—often from people who could not walk or sometimes could not see.

On June 22, 2001, the HSA marks its official 20th Anniversary as the world’s leading authority for handicapped diving. Actually, the entire year will be one of festivity, focusing on the theme: “1981-2001, Celebrating 20 Years of Service” to divers with disabilities and the diving industry.

Appropriately, this anniversary celebration began at the DEMA 2001 show in New Orleans. DEMA has always been a strong supporter of HSA since

it’s beginning. And HSA, a DEMA Charter Member, has always been a proud participant in DEMA’s annual convention—each year becoming a more prominent “draw” for visitors and vendors alike.

The promise of a busy year continues with several “Happy Anniversary” dive trips planned throughout the year. The first of these has become an HSA legend—Bonaire. Traditionally a popular destination for HSA divers for the past 16 years, the 20th Anniversary trip is likely to be a tireless party for all who attend.

HSA was founded in 1981 as a non-profit, independent diver training and certifying agency, specializing in diver education as well as on-going activi-

ties for people with disabilities. The goal—then as now—has been to promote scuba diving as a physically and psychologically beneficial sport for people with many types of handicaps, including paraplegia, quadriplegia, amputations and vision impairments.

In the beginning, handicapped diving was considered experimental by some, even impossible by others. But before long, recreational diving was accepted as an adventure sport for people with disabilities—a sport that got them out of their wheelchairs and into the marvels of the underwater realm. Here, the obstacles they encountered on land no longer existed—they were weightless, and as Jean-Michel Cousteau observed, “they could fly like dolphins underwater.”

News of the emancipating activity spread, necessitating expansion of the organization’s educational programs.

A logical direction led to the HSA Instructor Training Course, an intensive three days covering the theory and practice of teaching scuba diving to handicapped people. These courses, first offered in 1986 through NOAA’s Marine Sanctuary Program in Key Largo Florida, convey both technical and practical information accumulated over years of research combined with hands-on experience.

“We were the only organization in the world,” Gatacre emphasizes, “where an instructor can get the specialized training necessary to teach handicapped diving.”

Typically, the ITC's attract dive professionals with one trait in common—their eagerness to accept the challenge of sharpening their teaching skills by excelling in the specialty of handicapped diving. The roster includes 21 medical doctors and other health care professionals searching for relevant, reliable information, as well as diving notables such as Dennis Graver (HSA Instructor 100) and Jeff Bozanic (HSA Instructor 0069).

Just as with the Open Water handicapped classes, requests for ITC's grew in popularity, initially within the United States, then to Europe and beyond. Today, there are over 1700 HSA trained and certified instructors

teaching the HSA dive programs in 46 countries throughout the world.

These HSA trained and certified instructors teach their own classes of handicapped dive students according to unique diving performance standards developed by Gatacre. These standards, like the organization itself, are dynamic because they're always evolving and always open to input.

Gatacre is quick to acknowledge the participation of the diving industry in the development of the HSA and its educational materials. As early as 1982 the nation's major diver training agencies—primarily NAUI and PADI—realized that modification of existing performance standards could



Above: Lago ol'Octa (Lake ol'Octa), Milano, Italy, November 1, 1993. Aldo Torti, NAUI #11483 and HSA CD2-0349, far right relaxes with HSA President Jim Gatacre after qualifying as HSA's First Course Director.



Above: At HSA's 1989 fundraiser, Astronaut Buzz Aldrin greets Jean-Michel Cousteau, Jim Gatacre, and Pat Gatacre; Opposite: History revisited, a paraplegic divers' exuberant answer to the lure of the sea is captured on the cover of a 1982 issue of NAUI NEWS.

not adequately evaluate divers with disabilities. After two and a half years of extensive research, development and testing by Gatacre of "new" diving performance standards, HSA and Executive Educators from NAUI and PADI approved the new standards and the HSA adopted them.

The Performance Standards are based upon a handicapped divers degree of buddy-dependency in the water while executing certain skills. Gatacre explains that modification of standards means just a different method of accomplishing the same skill. The HSA diving performance standards are at least comparable and often exceed standards required by other training agencies of their able-bodied students.

During that same growth spurt of the organization Gatacre also devised his now-famous Multi-Level Certification, which is a way to assess and categorize handicapped divers. For example, without directly referring to disabilities, the certification of a level "A" diver would require them to dive with one certified diver buddy, whereas a level "C" diver would require the student to dive with two buddies, one of whom has been trained in diver rescue. Gatacre regards HSA certification in a very practical and effective manner, stating that whoever earns an HSA certification card, "knows it's up to him or her to dive properly and safely, just like it is for all of us...that's dignity, that's equality."

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Twenty Years of Service



Above: Jim Gatacre and handicapped diver Michelle Galler join Jean-Michael Cousteau during the 1992 filming of "To Fly In Freedom" in Fiji.

The HSA generates and regenerates all its own teaching materials. For instance, Gatacre originally wrote the Instructor's Manual and in response to worldwide input, revises it about every one and one-half years to reflect evolving training philosophies and equipment improvements.

Gatacre is forever busy improving or improvising features of the programs he created. The newest of these takes the sophistication of marine life identification out of the province of specialty courses and incorporates it as a required Performance Standard, even on a handicapped student's first open water dive. His reasoning is that an observant diver reacts and interacts with the underwater world with vastly increased environmental awareness. Because people tend to take better

care of that which involves and interests them, Gatacre believes the Marine Life Identification Standard will help make novice divers more comfortable during training, and more conscientious as an experienced diver.

"By really looking at the environment, they're able to get outside themselves and begin to enjoy where they are," Gatacre asserts. "By the time they've completed their open water training, they've learned to look at the underwater environment in a different way. They have a better understanding of plants and animals, ecological niches, and marine ecology in general."

Having graduated with a B.S. degree in Biology from the University of California (1976), provided an appro-

appropriate academic background for Gatacre to understand the advantage of divers becoming educated about the underwater environment. Following graduation, he spent two years teaching and creating instructional materials at the Orange County Department of Education Marine Science Lab in Dana Point Harbor, California.

From an instructor's viewpoint, students who are more comfortable in the water are easier to teach. Gatacre is convinced that informed and interested divers are active divers—ones who want to continue diving long after they feel that first wave of accomplishment.

"They're good candidates for further diver training," Gatacre adds. "This leads to lower diver drop-out, a big problem for the diving industry."

Gatacre's concept for a Dive-Buddy Program came as a response to able-bodied divers who wanted the sensitizing experience of diving with a handicapped partner. The course educates its participants about various disability types, how these relate to diving as well as special techniques to ensure enjoyment and safety for all members of the dive team.

The most recent giant stride for the HSA occurred in 1997 when Gatacre introduced the HSA Course Director Training Course to train HSA Instructor Trainers. These Course Directors represent the educational apex of the HSA teaching system and are responsible for recruiting, training, and certifying dive instructor candidates within their own geographical region. Some are dive shop owners, others are individual instructors. In



Above: In Australia's Coral Sea, November 2000, "Okohira" Takkato Okohira, NAUI #20015 and HSA CD25-1502 (left rear), and Jim Gatacre certify six new HSA Instructors, qualifying Okohira as HSA's 25th Course Director.

addition to promoting the HSA and conducting their own ITCs, Course Directors oversee the Open Water and Dive Buddy programs taught by the instructors they've trained. At present, 25 HSA Course Directors have dedicated their time and talent to extend the challenge of handicapped diving to people with disabilities who would otherwise never know such an opportunity existed for them.

HSA's Course Directors form the core of HSA Training Centers. All of them—whether in Poland, Japan, Australia, Brazil or elsewhere—are vitally linked to HSA's California headquarters. Internationally, the first and most consistently productive of these Training Centers is HSA Italy; this year HSA Canada and HSA Korea came onboard. Altogether 11 HSA International Training Centers, and eight HSA USA Training Centers are now in operation with more on the way.

HSA's formal acknowledgment as a relevant force within the international dive arena came just last year when HSA was accepted as a member of CMAS (Worldwide Underwater Federation), Europe's most prestigious diving organization.

In the past few years there's been an upsurge of interest in dive travel, creating lively competition among resorts that cater to exotic destinations such as Australia's barrier reef or the marine life splendor of the Egypt's Red Sea. Added to the increasing demands of divers from diverse cul-

tures and countries, resort operators are also encountering higher numbers of handicapped vacationers.

Years ago the HSA anticipated a range of architectural difficulties and prepared a detailed Resort Accessibility Evaluation to help acquaint resort personnel with the special needs of handicapped travelers and to advise economical solutions for accommodating those needs. HSA Accessible Resorts even include two of the internationally-renowned "Aggressor Fleet" dive yachts—the Kona Aggressor of Hawaii and the Fiji Aggressor, both owned by Dan Ruth (HSA Instructor #1241).

The HSA started offering dive trips in 1985 and currently conducts two to three major dive tours each year. Last summer, Bonaire and Egypt; winter 2001, probably Australia. The excitement and adventure so typical of HSA dive trips is never compromised by safety issues. Every effort is made to assure maximum accessibility and comfort to wheelchair travelers, even to destinations where modifications must compensate for rustic accommodations. An HSA trained and certified instructor is always present on every dive for an extra margin of safety and sense of security, especially for those who experience apprehension in a foreign environment.

One of the most enjoyable features of HSA dive vacations is the opportunity to create memories together as a group, sharing the mutual interest of

scuba diving. Just having fun and socializing with others is psychologically uplifting and produces surprisingly "rehabilitative" results.

In the HSA's 20 successful years one message clearly emerges: there is simply no substitute for expertise founded on experience. Proof of this is the growth of the organization, beginning in 1975 as a student project on the University of California's Irvine campus.

Jim Gatacre, a UCI student at the time, who was motivated by his own disability (a 1972 injury has left his right arm partially paralyzed). Gatacre traces his "can-do" spirit directly to his military years, having served as a U.S. Army Paratrooper with the 101st Airborne Division. Undoubtedly his positive attitude while still recuperating helped Gatacre obtain his NAUI Openwater certification in 1973. Impressed by his own experience with the benefits of diving, he wondered if people with permanent handicaps could also learn to dive. He decided to find out. They could, they did, and they do!

In that first class four paraplegics and three able-bodied divers were trained and certified. In those early days, he was actively recruited and encouraged to develop the HSA by some of the most important people in the major diver training agencies — receiving valuable input principally from Dennis Graver (HSA Instructor 100) at PADI, and Walt Hendricks Sr. at NAUI.

By 1983 Gatacre had earned NAUI Instructor status. In fact, Gatacre has been NAUI all the way, having received the NAUI Outstanding Service Award in 1995.

From the standpoint of finances and personnel it made sense in the 1980s, as it does today, to endorse HSA as a neutral, independent diver training and certifying agency. HSA continues its popularity upswing for the same reason it was begun. With the acknowledged support—both materially and philosophically—from DEMA, dive industry manufacturers, and the diver training agencies, the HSA now has over 3,000 members worldwide and the Instructor's Manual, so patiently and consistently updated by Gatacre, imparts its life-enhancing information via translation into nine languages. The two films made by the HSA with Jean-Michel Cousteau, "Freedom In Depth" (1985) and "To Fly In Freedom" (1992) are both available in a choice of video formats, both USA and European versions, even a captioned version for hearing-impaired divers. The HSA has never been content in any other position than at the forefront, which includes technology.

For additional information please feel free to contact the HSA at their e-mail address: hscuba@hsascuba.com and check out the website at: <http://www.hsascuba.com>. Here's to another 20 years, HSA!