

Lobster Blog

Mike Ault, Copyright 2005

I recently read an article in Utne magazine (online at www.utne.com) entitled "Dying for Lobster" that, as a diver left me horrified. For those of you who aren't divers, when you dive and breath air under pressure, more than normal amounts of nitrogen are forced into your blood, as long as you dive within proper limits and follow proper safety, this nitrogen comes back out without causing problems. However, if you push the limits, don't follow safety rules (for example, staying down to long and ascending to fast) then the nitrogen comes out too fast, like bubbles of gas in a soda can. The gas is likely to come out at joints and as a rash at the surface of the skin. Oh, it also comes out in the brain and spinal cord, causing stroke like symptoms and paralysis. This is called decompression illness, you may have heard it called, the bends. If you are rushed to a decompression chamber the symptoms in many cases can be reversed, although there can be residual side effects.

Anyway, the article talked about Nicaraguan divers who dive for lobster from lobster company boats. These divers dive with poor equipment, no depth or pressure gage, no dive computers. They may dive 15 or more times a day to depths of 120 feet or more. As a result many of them "get bent" and unfortunately, since these boats are out for 2-3 weeks, don't get the benefit of getting taken to a deco chamber until it is too late. This results in many being crippled for life and many die.

On a Scuba board I suggested setting up a donation center for used dive equipment that is still serviceable. Most of this equipment molds away in closets, or is sold on ebay for a fraction of its worth. Since there is already a tax-exempt group set up to provide deco chambers for the divers I thought we could probably set up with them to provide tax receipts (at least to USA divers) that they could then use for reducing their taxes. The Nicaraguan divers win, we win. We would also provide training manuals and training to help these divers understand how to avoid the injuries from bends and how to use the more complex dive computers.

I understand that this is not correcting the problem, the exploitation of the workers and a government that doesn't care, but we really can't do much about that. We can make these divers safe divers and ease or prevent their suffering. To a response, all responses were negative. No one saw the benefit of helping the divers, no one offered spare equipment.

Several of the more vocal respondents were from Canada, and I thought Canadians were a warm, friendly people who wanted to help others. Most were from the USA. I thought there would be more compassion for the plight of these divers, I thought there would be more generosity. I was wrong.

One diver said Red Lobster was the number one purchaser of the lobsters, I haven't confirmed that, nor do I know how to confirm it, if someone could I would appreciate it. Anyway, would a boycott help? The main reason the divers there dive is for the money. For 2-3 weeks of 15 dives a day and risking their health and lives they make \$300.00 and room and board. Now for their economy this is good money, right up to the point where it kills them. In a boycott, if it was 100% successful, would it help these divers? It might eliminate their livelihood and throw them back into abject poverty, I am sure they would thank us. Through education and the provision of better equipment we would improve the quality of their lives, and as a side effect, reduce the pressure on the lobster population as limiting bottom time would reduce the number taken.

I hate to think the divers may have been motivated by the thought that they could get more money for the used equipment by selling it rather than donating it. I also hate to think they are so naive as to think we could change the government there and make it more compassionate (haven't we spent billions to do that with no visible affect?) I also hate to think they care more about lobsters than they do men.