

BRISTOL CHANNEL DIVING SERVICES

Engineering Diving Excellence

FOCUS ON

BY STEPHEN PARKER **SPEARFISHING**

Spearfishing is the original underwater sport. Guy Gilpatrick is credited in started it off with his exploits hunting fish off the French Rivera with a hand held spear in the 1930s immortalised in his book "The Complete Goggler".

Both Hans Hass and Jacques Cousteau started their diving careers Spearfishing, carrying hand spears and then guns but always breath holding. When sports diving kicked off in the UK in the 50s and 60s Spearfishing was very much part of the sports diving scene and diving clubs throughout Britain were full of Spearos who hunted both by free diving and using the, then new, Aqualung.

Spear fishing fell out of favour with mainstream British diving circles in the 80's as the reality of the indiscriminate Spearfishing in the Mediterranean and other parts of the world became clear. Spearfishing didn't disappear it just went quiet. People continued to hunt underwater and clubs existed but not as part of mainstream diving as in some parts of Europe.

Spearfishing has discreetly resurfaced (excuse the pun), probably because of the growing public awareness of damaging farming and fishing practices along with the national food scares of the last 20 years. This has resulted in people rediscovering self sufficiency and responsible hunting.

Responsible Spear fishing is sustainable hunting. The reality is that the fish caught are killed and you shot them with a harpoon gun. That doesn't sit well with some people but the following factors need to be considered. No other fish is damaged by the exhausting "sporting" fight or by the barbed hook that is embedded in their mouth, the bit they use to catch food and to defend themselves. Their swim bladder is not ruptured by the rapid ascent from deep water, properly guaranteeing a slow painful death when the fish is put back in the sea.



Spear fishing doesn't leave broken gear on the seabed to entrap and slowly kill other sea creatures that just happen to get caught up in it. The normal practice is to dispatch the fish as quickly as possible. Only take enough fish to eat, only select the right size fish, respect the environment and not overfish areas.

Like every responsible angler and hunter the Spearo needs to know the habits and habitat of the species they hunt. They respect the regulations regarding what you can take and where you can fish. This takes time and careful study and they are happy to return with nothing when the right fish are not there.



It is not illegal to use scuba gear to Spearfish in the UK but true Spearos shun it. Not solely due to just sporting principles but because the kit is noisy, bulky and cumbersome. Spearos are silent hunters (Editors Note: Only whilst bloody underwater, Steve !) who need to move quickly with the minimum of effort thus preserving precious breath. And before anyone asks rebreathers still make some noise, breathing down corrugated hoses, solenoids clicking, direct feeds whooshing etc. Free diving is the quietest way to get close to the fish and even with a speargun; you need to get pretty close for your one shot to count.

Spearfishing is bloody hard. You need to be strong swimmer, reasonably fit and have very good aquatic skills and senses. This is my twentieth year as a qualified diver and I can say without reservation that learning to Spearfish and Freedive has been some of the most challenging diving skills I have had to learn. You don't have tons of gear, systems and procedures to get your head round. In spear fishing there is only a hand full of skills you need to know, however you have to execute them perfectly for you to have any hope in catching anything.

You need to be properly weighted and hydrodynamic during all states of your dive so that you waste the least amount of your precious lung full of air. Once on the bottom, the slightest disturbance could spook the fish. This all requires a high skill level and concentration to ensure perfection and at the same time you're trying to be as relaxed as possible to conserve oxygen! You need to be totally relaxed and focused solely on the task ahead. I have experienced the same levels of concentration while on challenging deep technical diving expeditions and you would be right to argue that you should be totally focused on all types of diving. However in Freediving the need is more important. The brain uses more oxygen than any other part of your body so if you are thinking too hard about doing something or faffing about you are using up your gas and scaring the fish.

All techniques need to be instinctive and the only way to be that slick is through lots of careful practice. Some of my Spearfishing betters have told me that they think the fish can sense tension and stress which can spook them. I believe them and have experienced many a day where I've caught nothing which is properly due to the frustration of having not seeing any fish worth shooting and having your dive partner nearby catching loads. This gets more annoying as you strain to find fish that are staying well away because they can sense that you quite clearly wanna get em!

I apologise if I sound elitist but you can't rush into becoming a Spearo and there is no room for 'wannabe's'. Yes these skills can be taught and you can do courses. The difference is you cannot expect the same "fast-track" educational model, unfortunately practised in scuba diving, to work with Spearfishing.

A student Spearo already needs to be a very comfortable in the marine environment and must be a patient perfectionist, ready to accept that newly acquired skills need lots of practice for them to become effective. It may take some time before you start catching fish. You cannot get away with half learned skills and you cannot compensate for bad technique with equipment. You really have to master the art. That for some (especially in the diving world where people seem to become "Advanced" a bit too quickly for my liking) will be quite a challenge.

I know this sound's like some Jedi, Zen rubbish but the truth is that the advanced practitioners really are experts and the strange "Spidey sense" they use when they dive has been gained from years of Spearfishing. You just can't get that from buying a place on a course. Don't sign on if you're not prepared to commit to learning it properly because you will never have any success.



Your effectiveness as Freediver and Spearo relies so much on the body's metabolism and sense of inner core alongside the need to have every detail of your aquatic techniques perfect. Add to this the hunting instincts and the need to be quiet and you begin to appreciate how challenging it is. For me to have any success I have to be totally focused and relaxed. I have had to have prepared the night before, got a good night's sleep, thought about when I will have breakfast, so I'm not using oxygen digesting food when I'm diving. I have to be aware of the conditions of the dive site, have an understanding of how tide and weather will affect the fish and ensure that I can safely return to shore. Being in the sea with nothing but a float or Kayak for company really enhances my sense of spirit of place and of how big the sea is in and how small I am, in a way I have only felt on remote

offshore diving expeditions.

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To me this is the whole point of doing it because I love a challenge and it's well worth the effort. Before you know it you have been in the water most of the day, swam a few miles and caught some of the freshest fish you're ever going to taste. And to finish off, regardless of whether you come back with fish or empty handed you've had an excellent workout and seen the marine environment from a different perspective. It is a terrific antidote to stressful modern living, giving me a great sense of satisfaction and well being. I love it!

