

# 7 Myths About Diving

By Michael Ange

Courtesy of: *Scuba Diving Magazine*

## 1. MYTH: DIVING—THAT WAS MY GRANDFATHER'S SPORT.

**TRUTH:** If you think scuba isn't extreme enough for you, you're not seeing past the first step. Sure, a lot of people never go beyond puttering around in nice, calm water, looking at nice, calm fish. But if you get the right training and equipment, you can get extreme with this sport. Try swimming through the surf zone off Southern California and it's you who'll need the Geritol, not Grandpa. Need more? Ever hand-feed a shark? Explore the far reaches of a flooded cave? Chase a 400-pound fish through the legs of an offshore oil rig? Go inside the rusting hallways of a sunken ocean liner? Swim beneath the polar ice caps? These are just some of the experiences that divers—and only divers—get to have. But you've got to build up to it, junior. So check your ego at the door, show Gramps a little respect and take the first step—earning Open Water certification—before you start talking smack.

## 2. MYTH: DIVING IS ONLY FOR PEOPLE LIVING IN THE TROPICS.

**TRUTH:** Few things rival the experience of floating effortlessly through warm, clear tropical water along a colorful coral reef. Unless, of course, it's drifting through a California kelp bed with a pod of sea lions. Or exploring the amazingly preserved ruins of a wooden shipwreck in Lake Michigan. Or finding a million-year-old shark tooth in South Carolina's Cooper River, or . . . the list goes on and on.

No matter where you are, chances are there's a popular dive site nearby. Don't believe me? Just ask anyone with the red-and-white diver-down flag on his or her car. Lakes, quarries, rivers, flooded mine shafts—almost anywhere there's water, you'll find divers. Heck, outside Abilene, Texas, you can even dive in a flooded under-

ground missile silo. Each of these sites provides its own unique dive experience and a chance to get started in the sport. Not every dive site is for every diver, but scuba diving is not just a sport, it's also a lifestyle and a very social activity. So, even if your local swimming hole isn't a world-famous dive site, an outdoor grill, a cooler, a couple of tanks of air and a dozen of your new best friends can still make for a whole lot of fun—palm trees optional.

## 3. MYTH: THERE ARE SHARKS IN THE OCEAN AND THEY EAT DIVERS. DON'T TRY TO DENY IT—I SAW JAWS AND OPEN WATER.

**TRUTH:** Don't tell Hollywood, but the factual record on shark vs. diver is pretty dull: Sharks just don't make a habit of munching on divers. In fact, except in certain conditions and environments, they don't even stick around when divers get in the water. Let's look at it from the shark's point of view. You're out cruising the depths, when out of nowhere this noisy, bubble-blowing pack of creatures that looks and moves like nothing else in the ocean drops into the water and starts flashing lights (i.e., camera strobes) at you. It's got to be the shark equivalent of *Close Encounters*. The first thing most sharks do: turn tail and run.

It used to be that divers could go their whole lives without ever seeing the beauty and majesty of a shark up close. Today, carefully managed encounter dives—from cage diving with great whites off Australia to hand-feeding reef sharks in the Bahamas—abound, and there is no better way to gain a true understanding of these amazing creatures than to see them up close.

Still not convinced? Then let me give you something serious to worry about instead: your dog. Yep. Behind those puppy dog eyes and that happy-to-see-you personality lurks the heart of a cold-blooded predator that's statistically far more dangerous than any shark. According to

dogbitelaw.com, “man’s best friend” killed 31 people in 2007 in the U.S. alone. According to the International Shark Attack File, only one person worldwide died from a shark attack in the same 12-month period, out of a total of 71 total recorded incidents. Based on those odds, you’re safer in the ocean than taking Rover for a walk.

#### **4. MYTH: YOU HAVE TO BE A SPEEDO-SPORTING COMPETITIVE SWIMMER TO DIVE.**

**TRUTH:** Sure, ultra-fit competitive swimmers make great divers because they’re comfortable in the water and they’re in great shape, but if the logic of this were true, only Tour de France racers would ride bikes.

Diving is an active sport and the better shape you’re in, the easier it will be, but any healthy individual with at least an average fitness level can do it. This myth is most likely fueled by the fact that there is a basic swim test at the start of scuba lessons. You’ll need the endurance to swim [300 yards with mask, fins and snorkel] nonstop, but there’s no time limit and it’s not a race. The instructor also needs to know that you have basic water skills and are comfortable submerging your face in water. That’s it. And when you consider that divers from age eight to 80 have passed this grueling test of physical ability, it’s pretty clear that anyone with an activity level above that of a chronic couch potato can do it. So, get off the couch and go diving already. And please—regardless of your fitness level—leave the Speedo at home. OK?

#### **5. MYTH: DIVING IS A MACHO SPORT THAT IS NOT FEMALE-FRIENDLY.**

**TRUTH:** This might have seemed true back in the 1950s *Sea Hunt* era when men of steel, like Mike Nelson (played by the late, great Lloyd Bridges), were out there spearing fish with their bare hands and rescuing damsels in distress. Only it wasn’t really true then, either. The lovely Zale Parry, the actress who played the damsel, was one of the most accomplished divers on the set. And when *Sports Illustrated* decided to feature the young sport of scuba diving in its May 23, 1955, issue, it was Parry who made the

cover.

It is true, however, that men have always participated in the sport more than women, but the gap has been closing steadily since the 1980s. Today, the male/female ratio is roughly 60/40, and everyone from equipment manufacturers to tour operators offer products specifically for female divers. And there’s no glass ceiling to this sport—there are female instructors, divemasters, boat captains and resort owners.

#### **6. MYTH: I CAN’T DIVE. I HAVE (INSERT NAME OF MEDICAL CONDITION HERE).**

**TRUTH:** Why not get a second opinion? Doctors are a very cautious bunch and often don’t understand the sport of diving, so if you ask about diving with a specific medical condition, their likely answer will be the safe one: No.

But before you let a lifetime of adventure slip away, you and your doctor should consult the experts at the Divers Alert Network (DAN). This nonprofit safety organization, affiliated with the Duke University Medical Center, can help you better understand the physical demands of diving and how they relate to your health. Call DAN’s nonemergency line at (919) 684-2948, and you may be surprised to find the answer is, “Yes, you can dive safely.”

#### **7. MYTH: SNORKELING IS JUST AS GOOD AS SCUBA DIVING.**

**TRUTH:** Don’t get me wrong. I like to snorkel—floating around on the surface peering down on the reef from above is a great way to spend time between dives. But just as good? No way! Not if you like action.

Snorkeling is sort of like watching a football game from the window of the Goodyear blimp high above. Diving is like suiting up, running down the tunnel and getting in the game. Strap a tank on your back and you’re a player—swimming with the sharks as equals, getting up close and personal with giant goliath grouper, or, for a good laugh, looking up and seeing the soft, bulging underbellies of all those snorkelers drifting like flotsam on the surface and blocking out the sunlight.