

XV FOTOSUB FAIAL 2006

National Underwater Photography Championship

Organization: Clube Naval da Horta and Federação Portuguesa das Actividades Subaquáticas.

1. Introducing XV FOTOSUB FAIAL 2006

The objective of the XV FOTOSUB underwater photography event is to select, out of the participating portuguese photographers, the national representatives for the 2007 international event.

The competition's aim is to produce underwater photographs during a two day long period; in equal conditions for all participants, which have to consider all 3 categories in contest: "Environment with and without diver", "Macro with and without theme" and "Fishes". At the end, each participant will present 5 photographs to the Jury (one for each category).

FOTOSUB is considered the most important national event on underwater photography, the photos and results being published in related newspapers and magazines, for example in "Notícias do Mar" and "Mundo Submerso", among others, allowing a strong touristic promotion of the used locations and increasing public interest on environmentally sustainable aquatic activities.

The choice of the Island Faial as the location for this competition was based on the interest of promoting the practice of healthy, non extracting and socially integrating activities in the Azores archipelago, therefore creating a platform for tourism development and pointing out the benefits of the Natura 2000 Network sites.

After the accident of the merchant ship "CP Valour" in December 2005 in the bay of Praia do Norte, doubts have arisen about the environmental quality of the waters around the island Faial, and in particular, the locations classified by the Natura 2000 Network. The FOTOSUB 2006 event can play an important role in clearing up this situation, certifying the existing quality.

For all these reasons, it's with great satisfaction that the Clube Naval da Horta, in association with the Underwater Portuguese Federation (FPAS - *Federação Portuguesa de Actividades Subaquáticas*), organizes the XV FOTOSUB – Horta 2006, national championship of underwater photography, taking place on Faial, from the 5th to the 7th of July 2006.

1.1 Underwater photography

The marine environment is under great pressure, resulting from fishing activities and sand extraction, which has led to a decrease in resources. Thus, the development of alternative activities, related to contemplation, may sustain a higher utility of the sea, and combine economically positive and environmentally healthy results.

The proximity to the big blue, the creation of solidarity ties inherent to the mastering of the sea, the exposure to a natural environment and the physical activity are some of the characteristics making marine activities a source of health and social integration.

Scuba-diving, in particular, is a demanding sport restricted to those who dare to initiate the conquest of this activity. The first step, the one that liberates the man of its earthly chains, is actually the only one that limits this activity. All the others are rather simple considering the number of participants, schools and clubs involved in its promotion and sponsoring.

The reward is the progressive discovery of the world that makes up 70% of the earth's surface. The understanding of the aquatic environment, then its hydrodynamics, its geology, and finally its biology, are steps not completely explainable to those who never ventured into it. The conquest of the Blue is, in the end, getting to know another part of our own home.

The introspection needed for photography, an individual act and, at the same time, a collective sharing of the moment, reinforces the potentialities of the human being, making us a more alert and better interpreter of the environment that surrounds us. To evolve in this activity in order to reach higher levels, the photographer is required to become an artist in possession of an unusual cultural and technical knowledge. To carry out this activity in the underwater environment curiously releases the photographer from its isolation. The mandatory interaction with the diving partner transforms photography from a solitary act into team work.

All these factors make Underwater Photography an activity that draws great social, cultural and environmental interest. The simple sharing of the results can trigger a better understanding of the sea and promotes its preservation.

1.2 Environmental interest

The Archipelago of the Azores contains a set of classified areas of high environmental value which are part of the Natura 2000 Network. The Faial-Pico Channel Marine Park, provides three of these classified areas, and their accessibility is a factor in addition to their high environmental value: Monte da Guia, Baixa do Sul and the small islets of Madalena.

The management proposals for the Channel areas as pointed out by the Department of Oceanography and Fisheries of the University of the Azores (available at <http://www.macmar.info>) include the creation of a Marine Park. This strategy aims at the restraining of extraction activities in order to get a better sustainability and long term profit.

The promotion of non-extractive activities is essential for a good collective understanding of the measures of interest enhancing the importance of the area. This is the only way to involve the ordinary citizen showing him that there is really an environmental patrimony worth preserving and protecting.

The future Marine Park of Faial-Pico Channel bears an incomparable set of biological, geological and cultural values that need to be preserved. Besides the ones related to the cetacean observation and aquatic sports, a diversity of environmental values remains that are intrinsically related to scuba-diving. On this level, there are several paradigmatic locations for this activity:

- The **“Ilhéu Negro”**, with its cave, at the entrance of the Bay of Porto Pim, hosts a community of sea birds (common-tern), whose observation is only possible outside their nesting period, thus preventing a threat to the species' preservation. But that is only in the beginning of the dive. Inside the water, on the sandy bottom, it is possible to see thornback-rays. Still on the sand, next to the islet, wide-eyed-flounders' territorial fights or excavations by red-mullets can be observed, in association with the remaining opportunist fishes, who try to get a free meal. The islet itself seems sprinkled with small delicacies that populate the rocks in clusters according to the amount of light present. In the middle of fauna and flora morays may appear, with their falsely menacing looks. Nearby, 5 minute away swim, is the **“Ilhéu Negro”** cave. In this cave, it is often possible to see a community of guelly-jacks that take advantage of the darkness of the cave to rest or feed from small shellfish.

- **“Vertente do Tio Almeida”** is a steep slope that finishes on a sandy bottom nearly 50m deep. Close to the bottom, schools of small pink fishes can be seen; they are called swallowtail sea perch. The male of this species possesses a contrasting striking yellow tail that has been subject to several FOTOSUB prizes, considering its great beauty. In **“Vertente”** it is possible to see several small cavities with schools of cardinal fish.

- **The Deep Cave of “Monte da Guia”** consists of one of the most difficult and dangerous diving-sites of this area. This incursion is not suitable for beginners of technical scuba-diving and should only be attempted by experienced divers. The entrance of the cave is located at a depth of 36m; the first circuit is 50m with a rather horizontal inclination. Inside the mountain, the slope starts being clearly ascending until the surface. The diver reaches an original air bubble at the centre of one branch of the mountain in Monte da Guia. The descend starts by continuing west until reaching sunlight, on the other side of the mountain, through a thin crack 10m deep. The sequence of ups and downs is what makes this diving site dangerous. Nevertheless, the contrasts, fauna and luminosity available in the cave create remarkable photographic potential.

- **“Entrada das Caldeirinhas”**, placed at the edge of the nature reserve, has a steep hillside full of tiny organisms with Atlantic fauna. Tuna is often seen in this area. Towards the end, on the higher levels of the **“Entrada das Caldeirinhas”**, seaweed dances to the flow of the stream entering the restricted area (see **“Caldeirinhas”**).

- **“Caldeirinhas”** constitutes one of the rarest reservation areas of Portugal and the only one in the Azores. For this reason and because, in its centre, delicate scientific tests are proceeding, we believe that it should not undergo scuba-diving with exception to high priority situations which are not justified by the FOTOSUB event. The remaining Monte da Guia has enough interest and beautiful landscapes, thus not justifying the entrance in the integral reserve.

- **“Ponta da Cabra”** represents the area of **“Monte da Guia”** where greater depths can be reached. The fact that the bottom exceeds 50m allows the divers, provided with a high level of safety, to reach levels where specific fauna and flora can be seen. Progressively, the communities of seaweed are substituted by invertebrates, the black-coral probably being the most amazing. These underwater shrubs are relics waiting to be photographed, for their beauty is only comparable to the biological interest of the fauna they hide.

- **The twin caves of “Monte da Guia”** are facing south-east. These sisters, separated at birth, have had such a different ontogeny that, nowadays, diving in one and not visiting the other is missing half of the potential of this diving-site. During the most productive months of the year, the caves fill up with small crustacean that are torn apart by Spanish-mackerel. The walls of the caves possess shades of colours that start with green from the seaweed, brown and red at the entrance, followed by the yellows and other unpredictable colours of the sea-sponges.

- **“Baía dos Radares”** has its deepest limit after 30m, and here lies an old ship that conveyed chinaware. From the ship itself, only a small part of the skeleton remains and is a usual shelter for red-scorpion-fishes. Equally, a frequent winner of the underwater photographic events. This fish makes approach possible thanks to its self-confidence in the chromatic and texture mimetic skills. It does not even imagine that those skills are inefficient when lighted by a lantern, luckily for the photographers. The hillside is, in this case, less steep, making it harder to reach the bottom, but on the other hand, increasing the time and space available at each depth, and so increasing the opportunities of the planned photograph.

- **“Baía de Entre-Montes”** is the last diving-site in the series around “Monte da Guia”. Diving starts usually down-stream, although this may vary according to the prevalent tide. The support boat should, therefore, be particularly vigilant as to where the divers will emerge. Diving in this area is recommended for those who look for species of lower depths and interactions between subtidal species like the parrotfish. Here the parrotfish can be seen permanently patrolling, while lazy salema periodically pass by and linger between seaweed.

- **“Baixa do Sul”** is one of the *ex libris* of scuba-diving in the Azores. The contrast between the dark-blue bottom and the bright blue of the open ocean is found in this area. Big sized barred-hogfish stroll with curious eyes around the divers and complement the special colours of the “Baixa”. Dusky groupers are part of the endless surprises that can be found here. If lucky, when looking up, there it is a sunfish, a big sized tuna or even devil-rays. Even if the visit is restricted to slack waters, the “Baixa do Sul” always holds a given surprise for the scuba-diver.

- **The inside of Madalena’ islets** represent the remains of an old crater. This sleeping volcano is, at the present time, the centre of activity of thousands of small organisms. Among these, the diver should be looking for anemones that gather underneath the bigger rocks. Jewel anemone’ tapestries and yellow polyps fill the objectives, eyes and soul of those who discovers them. After a while of looking at theses enormities of natural beauty, it’s worth wandering at the bottom and rest the sight on ornate-wrasses and rainbow-wrasses that swim close by.

- **The south side of Madalena’ islets** is the last Natura 2000 diving-site of our tour around the future Faial-Pico Channel Marine Park. Imagine yourself an immensity of sand at 12m depth. On this immensity of sand, there are thousands of islands and islets from the most unusual to the most fantastic shapes. Can you imagine? Congratulations! You are on the south side of Madalena islets! Don’t expect a monotonous sandy bottom. Among the foreseeable wide-eyed-flounders and red-mullets, you can find here, nests of triggerfish in the sand. Do not disturb them because, as with any dedicated parent, the

fish will become perturbed. Observe carefully though, how the male and female alternate the vigilance and ventilation of the descendants.

This outstanding series of immersions, made possible only in the Faial-Pico Channel Marine Park, is a rather unique reality on a national level. The emergency of its divulgence is strictly related to the public awareness of the importance of its preservation. The alliance with an event like the FOTOSUB seems not only obvious but compulsory.

1.3 Touristic relevance

The short term loss of economical return, as a result of the Marine Park management process that restricts extractions, can easily be counteracted by the increase of non-extraction activities (contemplation ones) compatible with territorial order. Among those, sea tours, cetacean observation and scuba-diving are in a particular and obvious position.

Activities linked to contemplation benefit directly from the restraining of extraction activities by freeing space and increasing biological exuberance. Indirectly, on the other hand, everyone can win with better environmental quality, especially if associated with the promotion of space. The development of labels of quality for local fish and the practice of activities in areas especially preserved may represent huge economy triggers. In this sense, the touristic interest of an activity that projects some of the most significant environmental characteristics of the Park. Moreover, this photographic selection will be carried out by the most experienced professionals of the art in the country.