Move Aside, Mike Nelson
by Dave Barry

I'm swimming about 20 feet below the surface of the Atlantic, a major ocean. I'm a little nervous about this. For many years my philosophy has been that if God had wanted us to be beneath the surface of the ocean, He would never have put eels down there.

But I'm not panicking. That's the first thing you learn in scuba class: Don't panic! Just DON'T DO IT! Even if a giant eel comes right up and wraps around your neck and opens its mouth and shows you its 874,000,000,000,000 needle sharp teeth, you must remain COMPLETELY CALM so you'll remember your training and take the appropriate action, which in this case I suppose would be to poop in your wet suit. I don't know for certain, because in my training we haven't gotten to the section on eels.

Also, I am just now realizing, we haven't covered the procedure for what to do if a large tentacle featuring suckers the size of catcher's mitts comes sloshing out and grabs your leg and starts hauling you into a vast, dark, hidden underwater cave whose denizens have little, if any respect for the Bill of Rights.

Also there is the whole issue of shar...of sha...of sh...There could be s--ks down here, somewhere.

But so far, all the marine life has appeared to be harmless. Mostly it has consisted of what I would describe, using precise ichthyological terminology, as "medium fish," many of which are swimming right up and giving me dopey fish looks, which basically translate to the following statement: "Food?"

That's what fish do all the time—they swim around going: "Food?" You can almost see the little question marks over their heads. The only other thought they seem capable of is: "Yikes!"

Fish are not known for their SAT scores. This may be why they tend to do their thinking in large groups. You'll see a squadron of them coming toward you, their molecule-size brains working away on the problem: "Food?" "Food?" "Food?" "Food?"; and then you suddenly move your arm, triggering a Nuclear Fish Reaction ("Yikes!" "Yikes!" "Yikes!" "Yikes!") and FWOOOSSHH! They're outta there, trailing a stream of exclamation marks.

This is a lot of fun to watch, because many of the fish are spectacularly, psychedelically beautiful. I'm sure there are all kinds of practical reasons for their coloration, but I don't want to know what these reasons are.

I like to think that who ever designed marine life was thinking of it as basically an entertainment medium. That would explain some of the things down there, some of the unearthly biological "contraptions" you see hanging out in the nooks and crannies of the reef or contraptioning along the bottom on a ridiculous number of arms and legs with all kinds of feelers and pincers and eyeballs sticking out randomly on the ends of stalks.

It is a comical place, the sea.

So anyway, I'm swimming along the reef, with my nervousness gradually being replaced by a sort of high—a combination of fascination and amusement—when suddenly I hear my scuba instructor, Ray Lang, make the following statement: "Bmoogle." Everything anybody says through an air regulator under water sounds like "bmoogle," which can mean "Hi!" Or: "Isn't this fun?" Or: "I'm having a coronary seizure!" So generally people communicate with hand signs.

When I look at Lang, he's pointing excitedly off to my right, so I turn and see a large ray, which looks sort of like a giant underwater bat. This is a major test of my ability to not panic.

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WHEN A STUDENT EVALUATION BECOMES A LAUGHING MATTER

Ray Lang (M-3664), the heroic mentor in Dave Barry's feature on the lighter side of learning to dive, is owner of the Divers Den dive stores in Key Largo, Miami and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. Lang became a PADI Instructor in 1973 and opened his Miami store in 1976. His first job in the diving industry was leading dive tours at John Pennekamp State Park — which he called a far cry from the "rock pit" in Kansas where he learned to dive. In addition to running three dive stores and teaching diving, Lang finds time to compete as a spearfisherman.

Barry, whose home keyboard is at the Miami Herald, requested that Lang be his instructor. In turn, it looks as if Barry was duly impressed with both Lang and the PADI System. Since his first "bmoogele" with Lang, Barry has brought his wife, Beth, and several media colleagues to be certified by Lang, has signed up for the Advanced Open Water Diver course, and, according to Lang, calls scuba diving "his new religion."

And what kind of student does a nationally syndicated humorist make? "He's very intelligent," said Lang. "For one, he aced all the RDP questions."

The only other time I've been in this kind of situation was in 1970 in the Virgin Islands, when I was snorkeling with a friend named Buzz behind a small, crowded dinghy, and a ray swam directly underneath us.

I have never seen a missile launched from a submarine, but I can't imagine that it leaves the water at a higher velocity than Buzz and I attained as we vaulted, arms and legs flailing, into the lower atmosphere, creating a minor hazard for commercial aircraft before finally landing in the dinghy, which nearly sank.

And that was a smallish ray, compared to this one. This ray has enough square footage to qualify as a voting district. And it is very close, swooping along, flapping its enormous wings and going: "Food!" Instantly I wish that I had brought my Miami Herald identification card (which is laminated and would work under water) so I could identify myself as a journalist. As it is, I have no choice but to strike what I believe to be a fairly inedible pose.

But the ray pays no attention to me. It just cruises by, very casual, very non-threatening, a ray taking care of ray business. And as it passes by, I find myself, without really thinking about it, trying to FOLLOW it — me, a weenie of legendary stature when it comes to dealing with the animal kingdom; a person who has on more than one occasion fled in desperate, armpit-soaking fear from CHICKENS — here I am, flippering through the blue-green semi-deep in pursuit of this nightmare-inducing THING.

Swimming next to me, Lang points toward the surface, up above the ray. I look, and there, silhouetted against the surface, is a large school of: barracuda. Yes! The ones with the teeth! In person! They're long and lean, looking very alert, all pointing in the same direction, as if awaiting orders from their commanding officer. "OK, men. Today we're going to swim around and eat.")

But for some reason, the barracuda don't seem scary, any more than the ray does. For some reason, NONE of this seems scary. Even the idea of maybe encountering a smallish s—k doesn't seem altogether bad.

It's beginning to dawn on me that all the fish and eels and crabs and shrimps and planktons who live and work down here are just too BUSY to be thinking about me. I'm a traveler from another dimension, not really a part of their already event-filled world, not programmed one way or another — food or yikes — into their instinct circuits. They have important matters to attend to, and they don't care whether I watch or not.

And so I watch.

Before I took lessons, virtually everything I knew about scuba — aside from the fact that it stands for "self-contained underwater breathing apparatus" — came from the syndicated television series "Sea Hunt." This was a very popular half-hour adventure show that ran from 1958 through 1961 and starred Lloyd Bridges as Mike Nelson, "free-lance underwater investigator."

There were 156 episodes of "Sea Hunt," but they all merge together in my mind into one basic plot, namely: Mike Nelson is swimming around, conducting a free-lance underwater investigation, when suddenly a bad guy swims.

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up behind him and cuts his air hose. Mike always acted surprised about this, which was pretty funny because in fact he got his air hose cut about as often as the average person burps.

You'd think it would have eventually dawned on him that for whatever reason — possibly related to the Gulf Stream — the waters around his boat were teeming with air-hose cutters, but old Mike never seemed to catch on.

So the climax of "Sea Hunt" was always an exciting underwater fight (accompanied by dramatic underwater horn music) in which Mike, his bubbles shooting all over the place, would struggle to get some air into his lungs and subdue the bad guy and get back to the surface and head over to the air hose store, where he probably got a volume discount.

"Sea Hunt" was great entertainment, but it did not leave you with the concepts of "scuba" and "safety" firmly cemented together in your mind.

The truth is, however, that scuba diving, especially at the relatively shallow depths recommended for recreational divers, is quite safe. Bad things can happen, but not nearly as many as can happen in a truly dangerous environment, such as your local expressway. And virtually nothing bad is likely to happen unless you go out of your way to help it.

So far, I'm pleased to report, I have not had my air hose cut one single time. I did have one terrifying Lobster Encounter (which I'll describe in harrowing detail later, when I feel you're ready to handle the emotional strain), but fortunately I was able to handle the situation through a combination of (a) not panicking and (b) letting go of the lobster. But I probably never would have thought of this without proper scuba training.

The training I got was the standard course authorized by the Professional Association of Diving Instructors, or PADI. If you want to get into scuba diving, you should take an authorized course. For one thing, you'll learn many useful tips that will help to make your dive as enjoyable and safety-free as possible.

For another thing, if you don't have a card certifying that you've been properly trained, reputable dive shops will not rent you equipment or fill your tanks with air, which, as you can imagine, comes in very handy in the aquatic environment.

The guy who trained me, Ray Lang, 39, knows a lot about the aquatic environment. This is ironic because he was born and raised in Wichita, Kansas, a locale you very rarely see featured on Jacques Cousteau underwater specials ("Himmler excitedly gestures to Pierre that he has found a piece of the sunken tractor"). But in his early 20s he became obsessed with scuba diving and moved with his wife, Teresa, to South Florida, where they eventually opened a small chain of dive shops called Divers Den.

Lang's true passion, however, is competitive free-dive spearfishing, a moderately insane sport in which you wear only a mask and flippers — no air tank — and, holding your breath for two minutes or more, dive down as far as 100 feet, trying to locate, stalk and spear the largest possible fish without blacking out from oxygen deprivation and maybe getting hauled back to the surface, but maybe not, which has been known to happen.

Lang and two other men won the 1968 national team free-dive spearfishing championship; he also holds world spearfishing records for six species of fish, including three species of s-ks.

Lang has dived all over the world and had some fairly remarkable experiences, which he describes in a flat, Midwestern-style twang, often employing unconventional but surprisingly useful words such as "motate," as in:

"...so I look up, and I see I'm about to swim directly into this LARGE tiger shark, has to be 15 feet, and I think, whoa, time to motate out of here, so..."

Or:

"...so I figure, how hard can it be to catch one of these things? So I grab it, and I'm trying to motate on out of there, but it gets one tentacle wrapped around a rock, and now it has hold of ME, and I should stress here that this type of anecdote does NOT form the basis of the diving-course curriculum. When you take the course, you start out with some classroom sessions wherein you learn basic diving theory, including a lot of information concerning how pressure relates to volume.

This is, of course, exactly the kind of thing that put you to sleep in high school, but you find yourself paying very close attention in scuba class, once you realize that the volume they're talking about is the air in your own personal lungs, and that if you take a deep breath from your tank at a depth of, say, 40 feet, and then, while holding your breath, you shoot, missile-style, to the surface, your little air sacs could start exploding like defective condoms, a situation which, as Lang put it, can be "very fatal."

Fortunately, there is a very simple protective measure. All you have to do is KEEP BREATHING. That's it. You'd think there'd be no way you could forget it. But it turns out that's the biggest danger you face under water: not eels or s-ks, but the failure to perform an act so simple and natural that you have presumably been doing it on a routine basis since early childhood. Yet it was stressed so heavily in scuba training that I found myself writing it repeatedly in my notes, as if it were some kind of radical new science breakthrough. "IMPORTANT TO KEEP BREATHING," I would write. And: "NEVER STOP BREATHING!"

Speaking of the inevitable, there comes a time in your scuba training when you leave the classroom and get into some actual water, usually in the form of a swimming pool. This was where I encountered my first major diving challenge, namely, putting on the wet suit.

The wet suit does an excellent job of protecting you and keeping you warm even in cold water, but putting it on for the first time is like trying to get into a giant foundation garment that has been possessed by an evil spirit. You wind up lying idiotically on your back, legs in the air, tugging and straining at this malevolent piece of rubber, fearful that if you let go, it will leap to its invisible feet and start dancing around you, laughing silently and making invisible but unmistakable hand gestures.

My first scuba exercise was equally exciting. Lang and I were standing in about 5 feet of water, and all he wanted me to do was kneel on the bottom. That was it. So, bearing firmly in mind The Undersea Journal — Third Quarter 1989
Don't Panic and Never Stop Breathing— I put my air regulator in my mouth, ducked my head under water and immediately, with a natural effortlessness that suggested I had been doing these things all my life. I (1) panicked and (2) stopped breathing. My feet started inexplicably drifting upward of their own accord, my mask started filling with water, I started choking and flailing my arms ineffectually around and the lone thought I could summon into my brain was: "Yikes!"

So I thrashed my way back to the surface, a failure. If you want to feel like a complete dweezil, the best way I know to accomplish this is to stand in front of a guy who has swum down into the depths with no air tank and speared a 10-foot hammerhead, and explain to this guy why you seem to be unable to accomplish the mission of kneeling on the bottom of a swimming pool in 5 feet of water.

But Lang, who's used to this, was patient, and before long I was rotating around the pool like a regular frogperson, making all kinds of astounding underwater discoveries.

In between my ground-breaking exploration, Lang had me practice various skills, such as removing my mask and air regulator under water, then getting them back into place. This is not difficult if you simply remember what you were taught, although at first your instinct is to yell, "Time out!" and make all the water go away while you get yourself straightened out, which of course would not be a practical solution if you were 50 feet down.

Another skill I learned, I'm pleased to note, is "buddy breathing," which is when two divers share one air tank because one of them has run out of air or had his hose cut. I had no trouble with this skill because I had seen it so many times on "Sea Hunt." As Lang and I swam along the pool bottom, passing the regulator back and forth I could almost hear dramatic horn music.

But the true drama came the day I dived in the ocean. We went to the John Pennekamp State Park/Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary complex in the Florida Keys, which is one of the world's most popular dive sites because of its spectacular and accessible reefs. These are made up of several jillion living and deceased little creatures called "polyps," whom we might think of collectively as nature's own enormous half-time marching band because of their ability to group themselves into amazing formations.

The reefs, and almost all the life forms that thrive on and around them, are protected by strict laws, as Lang explained to me in detail before we went out.

"You may not spear or possess any snook," he informed me. Frankly this had never crossed my mind, but I wrote it down anyway, because the last thing you'd want to do is to wind up in prison and have the other inmates ask you what you were in for, and you'd have to answer: "snook possession."

Lang said I could take a lobster if I found one big enough, but I figured there was no chance of this. I hate lobsters. As far as I'm concerned, lobsters are large underwater insects. I don't like to be in the same restaurant with them. Unfortunately, I failed to mention this to Lang.

(Sound of horn music starting to play quietly but dramatically in the background.)

I will spare you a gushy description of the dive itself, except to say that when you finally see what goes on under water, you realize that you've been missing the whole point of the ocean. Staying on the surface all the time is like going to the circus and staring at the outside of the tent.

At first Lang had me practicing my scuba skills, but after that I basically just motored along, very relaxed, grooving on the scenery, the fish, the comical marine contraptions. Even the giant ray, even the barracuda, merely served to heighten my enjoyment. The whole thing was going perfectly.

A little TOO perfectly.

(The horn music gets louder.)

OK. So I'm swimming along, and suddenly Lang gestures for me to swim down to where he's crouched in the sand, next to a coral ledge. He is pointing to something, but I can't see what it is. Suddenly his hand flashes out.

(Very loud music now.)

And now Lang is thrusting something into my hand, and it is, as you have deduced, the dreaded Big Bug of the Deep. And I am HOLDING it. And it is gesturing violently with all 758 legs, clearly conveying the underwater message: 'HEY! Let GO, dammit!!' Which, of course, I do. Instantly the lobster motates at very high velocity in reverse gear back under the ledge, causing bmoogles of chagrin to erupt from various watching divers, who were hoping to EAT it.

Pervers.