

# GIVE THESE DIVERS A BREAK!

As many people are well aware, two divers, Allyson Dalton and Richard Neely were rescued after being adrift for 19 hours off the Whitsunday Islands in Queensland. It is a credit to the Queensland emergency services that they were found reasonably swiftly once daylight was available. It is also a great relief that they were relatively unharmed.

I have followed this story closely and with great interest, both as a long time diver and as Executive Director of the Divers Alert Network (DAN) Asia-Pacific. DAN is a group of worldwide not-for-profit membership-based organisations whose core mission involves striving to enhance the safety of diving for the recreational diving community. Divers Alert Network is not an insurance company. The organisation, on behalf of its members, sources appropriate insurance coverage from a variety of insurance providers around the world.

All DAN members are automatically covered with up to US\$100,000 Emergency Evacuation Coverage, no matter where in the world they are, for diving and non-diving accidents or illnesses. In addition, members can choose to add dive injury insurance to their membership if required. This insurance is designed to pay for the medical costs associated with covered diving accidents.

Allyson is a long time member of DAN America and Richard of DAN Europe. They are both experienced divers who have dived in various parts of the world.

On this occasion they went for a day's diving on a charter vessel. They had three uneventful dives followed by one that evolved into this drama.

From the information I have gleaned, I find it perplexing that these divers have been treated so viciously by parts of the international media.

There is some dispute about what Allyson and Richard were told in the dive briefing. It appears that the general group was advised to stay within the lagoon. Allyson and Richard have stated that they were given a separate briefing on how to leave and re-enter the lagoon, and it is not an uncommon or unreasonable practice to allow more experienced divers to explore beyond the general boundaries.

It seems that they left the lagoon and drifted with the current but were then unable to find a way to re-enter the lagoon. This can easily happen and does not mean that the divers were foolhardy or incompetent.

There is evidence that they entered the water at 1400 and surfaced at 1500 as planned. They weren't the only divers who surfaced outside the lagoon. Some other divers were picked up by a dinghy outside the reef, apparently not very far from Allyson and Richard. The latter claim that they saw this occurring and waved their 'safety sausage' and blew a whistle to attract attention, unfortunately without success. I believe them! It is not always easy to hear a dive whistle and a relatively small safety sausage can be missed, especially if the boat driver and divers are not looking for it and/or otherwise distracted as may well have been the case in the earlier period after the divers surfaced. I have personally spent 30

minutes in a calm sea, holding a larger sausage, and watching a boat looking for me. However, they could not see me as they were looking into the sun. At least Allyson and Richard had the sense to carry a 'sausage' and whistle, something I commend. I'm sure that in future that they will be looking at better alternatives, as should other divers.

Once caught in the surface current, Allyson and Richard would have been quite swiftly swept into the distance and may well have been very difficult to see from the boat, despite being able to see the boat themselves.

There has been speculation in the media that they took drinking water with them on the dive and that they were wearing particularly thick wetsuits. It was also stated in some reports that they carried a 'shark pod', a relatively large and obvious appendage. I have heard of no evidence to support the claim of the shark pod or water. The choice of wetsuit varies between divers as some get colder than others. For divers who have been diving recently in warmer waters, such as Richard had, the Whitsunday water would be relatively cool.

Some media reports appear to suggest that these divers planned this event - possibly to sell their story for a fortune if they survived! If this is the case, they are far braver than I am. What guarantees are there that you would be found alive, if at all? They faced the real possibilities of drowning, severe hypothermia and harassment by sharks, among other potential threats. If they had planned this, how would they have hidden from the boat and later aircraft? Apparently there were no rocks or reef to hide behind - these divers were in open water and there is no place to hide.

It appears that the local police were not called until 1730 the evening, some 2.5 hours after these divers were due to, and did, surface. To me this is an unacceptable delay. The reasons for this delay will eventually be ascertained when the Workplace, Health and Safety investigation is completed. However, had the police received a call earlier, an aerial search may have been conducted with reasonable light conditions and the divers may have been found far earlier, and with relatively little expense.

When these divers were discharged from hospital they were suddenly faced with dealing with a very enthusiastic mob of media. No doubt they were exhausted after spending 19 hours at sea with no sleep and I suspect that they found it difficult to cope. The option they chose was to appoint a media manager to manage the situation for them. I'm sure that many of us would have done the same in that situation as it can be very stressful trying to deal with the various media requests, especially after a traumatic experience. Personally, I don't know or care if and how much they have, or will be, paid by various parties for their story. In my view, these folks have done little or nothing wrong and if they happen to gain some benefit from this unfortunate situation, then personally I believe that this is their prerogative.

There has been a lot of speculation about the costs of the search and rescue exercise and whether or not this will be covered by the divers' DAN Memberships and insurances. Richard and Allyson's DAN Memberships and insurances would cover them for all costs associated in their emergency evacuation to hospital once they were found, and the associated hospital costs. DAN has also offered to make a relatively modest contribution to the rescue organizations towards the cost of this expensive rescue. However, at this point in time we have not been billed for any substantial amount and have told that

this is unlikely to occur in this case. Apparently, Australia is a signatory to an international treaty that provides assurances that searches will be conducted for international visitors.

It is unfortunate that this incident has once again focused the world's attention on the safety of diving in Queensland. I have recently written a paper of scuba diving accidents in Australia and, based on the local and worldwide data I have gathered, Queensland appears to have one of the best diving safety records in the world. I am certain that few people are aware that 8 divers were recently found alive after 46 hours adrift in southern Taiwan. Sadly, dive incidents such as this do occur from time to time all around the world. However, DAN maintains that scuba diving is a relatively safe and highly rewarding recreational activity, but, as with other adventure pursuits, mistakes and accidents are inevitable from time to time.

I truly believe that Allyson and Richard are the victims in this saga and it is important that we do not lose sight of this. Hopefully they will fully recover from this ordeal after some good rest and appropriate counseling and get back in the water to enjoy some more diving.

The thoughts expressed above are my personal views only resulting from over 30 years as a dive professional and more than 15 years of dealing with diver safety with the Divers Alert Network.

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