

WtF: The Decline in Scuba Participation

By John Adsit

I have been reading a lot about the decline in scuba participation, and I have been thinking about it in the terms of what I call the **WtF Ratio**—how does the **Fun** derived from an activity compare to the **Work** required to have that fun? By “work,” I refer to every unpleasant hurdle that must be crossed to participate, including effort, cost, and inconvenience. By “fun” I refer to any sort of pleasure derived from the activity, the reason we are doing it in the first place. If the ratio of **W** to **F** gets out of balance, then participants get a different **WtF** feeling and stop participating.

This goes for all activities. Here are two examples of two other activities that are in significant decline, at least in the USA.

- Tennis participation has plunged, and discussion about the reasons focus on the revolution in racket technology a couple decades ago, technology that suddenly gave even basic players the ability to smash killer serves and blast unreturnable ground strokes. It completely changed the nature of the game, and people found the new game a lot less fun both to play and to watch.
- With golf, both W and F are affected. Golf has increased in cost, both for equipment and play, with golf course management apparently unaware of the law of supply and demand. Golf courses are closing around the country because of lack of demand. Most analysts point to reasons that the game is not as much fun as it used to be, including especially (but limited to) the increase in playing time. Games that used to take 4 hours are now taking 5, meaning not only that you are spending more time than you would like at the activity, that extra time is spent staring at the people ahead of you in the hope that they will finally move along so you can resume play.

So what about scuba? Scuba is a high-cost activity. Consequently, it is important that the pleasure derived from it be proportionately high enough to make that expense worthwhile. That is where I believe scuba is failing, as I will demonstrate this by outlining the evolution of my own diving experience.

My early diving

I started scuba nearly a quarter century ago, with low expectations. My wife and I were planning a vacation in Cozumel, and I thought I might do a couple of dives while there and then every other year or so on Caribbean vacations. I got certified in a very poor course that violated standards, as I learned later. When I got to Cozumel, I did not feel prepared, so I took AOW from someone who did a great job, vastly improving my comfort and skill as a diver.

Then I did my first dive as an AOW diver. It was on a reef called Palancar Caves, and I was immediately thrilled by its beauty. We were joined by a 5-foot grouper and a 2-foot angel fish, both of which stayed with us throughout the dive. The divemaster led us on a winding path through the towering coral structures. Early in that dive I decided that diving for me was not going to be a couple times every other year sort of thing. My plans had changed. I was hooked.

My wife does not dive, but as an avid snorkeler, she was happy to make diving a key factor in vacation planning. Over the next years I experienced wonderful diving in Cozumel, the Cayman Islands, Aruba, Bonaire, Curacao, Saba, St. Maarten, and Belize. We snorkeled the gorgeous, colorful reef in Akumal

Bay. We spent a week in Fiji with its brilliantly colored soft coral and went on to a liveaboard on the Great Barrier Reef. The GBR was simply spectacular—I loved every dive, and my wife had more snorkeling time than I had dive time. On our last dive of the trip, my buddy and I were milking our dive at the top of a reef that came within a few feet of the surface, and my wife was snorkeling along with us. A minke whale passed, nearly within touching distance. It does not get any better than that.

Summary: My early years of diving were filled with wonderful experiences that I wanted to continue forever. The fun I experienced in those dives made every bit of work required well worth it.

How Things Changed

Things started to change for me about 15 years ago.

- In early 2005 I joined a trip to Thailand, only months after the tsunami. We were saddened by the destruction from that event, but that was not the worst. We did several dives on “reefs” that were simply not there, dynamited to rubble by the local fishermen. I remember a clownfish threatening me as they are wont to do, but she was alone, hovering over coral rubble, without a mate or anemone in sight.
- I started diving in South Florida annually, and annually it seemed the reefs were getting a little worse, with more dead coral and fewer fish. Over time there were fewer divers as well. Many of my trips were canceled because not enough people were signing up for the dives.
- Over the years, the climate in South Florida changed. For the first years, I only came for a week, and I usually dived as many days as I wanted. In the last 10 years I have been coming for months, and in the last 5 it has been hard to schedule dives because so many days are undiveable because of wind. I confirmed that with a dive operator I used last winter. He said he could now run trips fewer than half the times as a decade before. His business was suffering. He sold it a month later.
- My wife and I took a trip to the Bahamas, and we spent a week on Andros Island, where we spent the days exploring acres of totally dead, white coral. There were almost no fish, except for the occasional lionfish.
- We took several trips to Akumal Bay over the years, mostly so I could dive the nearby caves, but we still snorkeled the reef that had been so beautiful years before. Each year it was in worse shape. We watched it gradually die. Today the reef inside the bay is almost completely dead.
- One year our trip to Akumal was marred the mass of garbage arriving on the beach every day. Maintenance workers created an enormous pile of it behind a building. It looked to me like cruise ship trash illegally dumped at sea.
- I led dive trips for a shop to both Belize and Cozumel. In both cases, I was shocked by the deterioration of the reefs. Today Cozumel is closing popular reefs to diving for extended periods of time in the hope they can recover.
- A couple of friends joined my wife and me for a trip to Australia, and we repeated with great expectations my earlier spectacular liveaboard trip on the GBR. What a disappointment! If you saw the documentary *Chasing Coral* (<https://www.chasingcoral.com/>), you know how that reef is dying. The Director of Diving on our liveaboard said he thought there would be no reason to dive the GBR in 20 years. It happened sooner for me—I won’t be back. It is too long a trip for too poor an experience.

- In Bali we did dives in which it was like submerging in a landfill, with garbage covering the surface and drifting down to the coral below. On a surface interval a couple of us reached over the side of the boat and took a couple bushels of garbage out of the water. That was a futile gesture given the total amount around us, but at least we did something.
- I went to a presentation by Jean Michel Cousteau, part of which was spent discussing the rapid death of the reefs in Fiji.
- A tech student planned to visit me in Florida so we could work on his training. The week before, he had led a shop trip to St. Croix. He said the dying reef in South Florida was much healthier than the one in St. Croix, and there was much more fish. The mood of the customers on the St. Croix trip was something like “I paid thousands of dollars for this crap?” I could not work on his tech training, though—a week of windy weather canceled all the diving.

Summary: When I first learned to dive, I was amazed by the ocean beauty I saw. I was hooked by it, and scuba became an obsession. Today, it just isn’t the same. I have had almost no experiences in recreational diving to match what I had in those earlier years. I can see why for many new divers, there just isn’t enough pleasure in the experience to make it worth its expense. I am frankly almost there myself.

So what do we do? I really don’t know. This is beyond the control of the diving industry. The rest of the world seems to be all too happy to let this happen.