

# Filming those Marine Behaviors

## By Steve Douglas

Over the years I have been privileged to view underwater footage shot by both novice and professional shooters alike. I have rejoiced in those special 'once in a lifetime' clips and commiserated with the shooter who missed the shot they so earnestly were hoping to get.

What can we do to ensure that our filming efforts produce the best results? Let's examine for a moment what we are shooting. An angelfish swims by, you film it following its path and panning along with it. A white tip shark swims by and you film it allowing it to come into the frame and go out. A frogfish sits on a rock and you film it as well. It is posing beautifully for you and so you film some more.

My question for you, the shooter, is what exactly did you videotape? The angelfish is swimming, as is the white tip shark. The frogfish is sitting and breathing slowly in and out. What were their behaviors? Well, there really weren't any. What you just filmed were video snapshots, wonderful for identification purposes but not very useful in order to create interesting, informative and exciting video productions.

Are there really any uses for any of these video snapshots? Yes, there are. They can make for perfectly good establishing shots before you get into the meat of your video. Therefore, they are indeed worth shooting.

However, the meat of your video is what holds the viewer's interest, and that interest is held by the behaviors of the marine life you have filmed. There are certainly a plethora of behaviors that make for fascinating and marketable footage and finished productions. So, what can we do to make sure we get to shoot those behaviors? How can we increase our chances of filming that hairy frogfish luring for food, and those beautiful mandarin fish in their evening mating dance. After all, most anyone can film a moray eel sitting under a rocky ledge. What can we do in order to get that footage of a large scalloped hammerhead being cleaned or a giant cuttle fish depositing her eggs between the cracks of a wall? And finally, how to get the incredible fighting behavior of a sperm whale battling that giant squid? These are the type of behaviors that really pay off on film. They are unique, fascinating to watch, and make a film all the more exciting.

Let's take a look at just a few things we can do to increase our chances of catching behaviors on film.

One thing I have noticed, whether I have been on a live aboard ship or a resort, is that most dive masters with these diving institutions tend to keep their groups fairly close together so as to better watch over them. This is great for safety purposes but not necessarily for either photographing or filming goals. How often have we all seen a group of divers, be they photographers or videographers, clustered around a single blue ribbon eel, all trying to get their shots with strobes flashing left and right, video footage with lights blazing, or simply waiting until the person ahead of them is done. Meanwhile, sand and particulate is often kicked up ruining the visibility or scaring the bejezzus out of the poor eel who dives back into his hole. If this occurs to you, try this simple strategy. Wait until the divers have all moved on. Chances are you will find something else to film without having to worry about another diver's strobes going off in your video, or sand being kicked up ruining your video clips. Plan on going back to that overcrowded spot when everyone has moved away. By then the particulate will have settled, the ribbon eel will no longer be as afraid, and you will improve your chances of filming the eel extending from its hole.

Another strategy is to thoroughly research the area you are going to be filming in, as well as researching the marine life you hope to shoot. You will be armed with knowledge that not everyone on board may have. You will know what to expect in terms of knowing the best place to find certain creatures, what time of day is best for capturing particular behaviors, and what to look out for and be aware of.

For example, my favorite places to dive for large pelagic marine life are the Cocos Islands off the coast of Costa Rica. Well known for its schooling hammerheads, divers come from around the world to see and film these magnificent creatures and the large numbers of pelagic fish that come to these islands. The scalloped hammerheads often come in close to the rocks to be cleaned by Barber fish. Getting footage of a hammerhead hovering still over a cleaning station while having its gills, and skin cleaned is a marvelous behavior to catch on film. The problem is that the bubbles emitted by divers generally spook hammerheads. Put eleven or more divers in the same vicinity and the hammerheads that would have come in, will be spooked by the wall of bubbles and, quick as lightning, dart away. What strategy can we apply to this situation to assure that you will get the footage? The strategy, once again, is simple. Rather than follow the crowd, allow the divers to get a significant distance ahead of you. Once they move on, and it is only you in the vicinity, the great reduction in bubbles will bring the hammerheads back into the area where you and your buddy will be waiting cameras and camcorders in hand to capture the cleaning behaviors and action. Of course, you should let the dive masters know what you intend to do. After all, you are their responsibility no matter how experienced a diver you are.

Mandarin fish generally do not come out to mate until sundown. They are generally quite shy and easily frightened, so a large group of divers all around one small area might disturb them even further. If you go in the water at noon looking for a couple of Mandarin fish to rise up in the water column as they begin their courtship, you will have a long wait. Knowing when to go in the water will greatly enhance your chances of filming them.

Most white tip sharks are nocturnal feeders. Sure, you can occasionally capture them feeding during the day but if you want to increase your chances of securing that footage, plan on a night dive. It is all in knowing when is the best time of day or night to film the particular sequence of footage you hope to get. Do not hesitate to ask the dive masters. After all, they dive there day after day and they are usually always happy to share their knowledge.

Another critical filming tip is to never chase marine life. You will not get behaviors on film that way. They will spook and dash away leaving you only with a tail shot as it disappears into the deep blue. Settle yourself down, allow the fish to come to you and get comfortable with your presence. Move slowly in the water should you need to make adjustments to your lights. Abrupt movements might very well scare it down its hole or chase it away. Always be patient when filming. Do not expect the critter to perform a Broadway show. Give it time, and, if you do, that shy Mantis Shrimp might just rise up and show off her sack of eggs for you to film.

A most important strategy is being prepared with the proper equipment for the type of filming you wish to do. If you were diving in the Galapagos Islands, hoping for those whale sharks to come by mouths agape filtering zooplankton, it would be best not to have your macro lens on the housing. The same applies in reverse, diving Lembeh Straits calls for a macro or super macro lens if you want to film that pregnant pygmy seahorse or the ornate ghost pipefish searching for food on the muck bottom. The strategy applied here is absolutely essential towards filming the type of behaviors and creatures you set out to film.

So now we have a few basic strategies for us to follow:

1. Stay clear of large groups of divers that may frighten away what you hope to film.
2. Be willing to come back later to a spot whose area has been kicked by others.
3. Research the area and marine life you hope to film. Use your dive master's knowledge and experiences.
4. Be willing to be patient. The behavior will occur if you are.
5. Be prepared with the proper lights, lens, and equipment.

6. Avoid chasing marine life. It stresses them and greatly reduces your chances of capturing a unique behavioral moment.

One final strategy to remember is to always be ready for that unexpected shot. These strategies are not foolproof. Sometimes it is a matter of being in the right place at the right time with the right equipment. You never know when that may happen. This is one reason I never go diving without my housing and camcorder ready to film. To paraphrase an often used platitude, 'It is better to have your camcorder and housing and not need it, than to need it and not have it.' In my heart I know that the one time I go on a dive without my housing will be that one time when that sperm whale and giant squid show up prepared to do battle. If you ever do get this footage, send it me.

Steve