

Q&A: PASCAL VAN ERP

Scuba Diver chats to Pascal van Erp, world-renowned Dutch technical diver who was the founder of what is now known as Ghost Diving, dedicated to the removal of ghost fishing nets

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Q: As is the norm with these Q&As, let's start at the beginning – how did you first get into diving?

A: Adventurous as I was, always very involved in outdoor activities and sports, I started diving lessons in 2005, mainly inspired by the adventures of Jacques Yves Cousteau. A year later, I already took the first targeted step towards much more advanced North Sea diving, which in terms of conditions cannot be compared with diving in most of the other seas and oceans. The North Sea is where the environmental problems caused by lost fishing gear came to my attention and I never let go. When I look back, I realize that this all developed in a short amount of time, that's kind of in my nature.

Q: You are highly regarded as a GUE-trained technical diver. What was it about technical diving that attracted you to this discipline?

A: As I progressed in diving and gained more experience, especially in the North Sea, I encountered several situations that I did not like. It was often the individual ways in which people solved issues related to safety and task performance that in my experience were not at all, or not enough, in line with the possibilities that exist by operating as a team. Whether it was exploring a shipwreck or performing a specific task, many dive organizations were person-oriented, very self-sufficient, ignoring the possibilities and even the need for a solid team. In 2009, I finally found what I was looking for in GUE and just focused on their approach: Make sure you can handle your dives mentally and physically and learn how you can make it easier for yourself with the help of standardization and muscle memory. Most importantly, do everything as a team. The basis of standard equipment and procedures is the absolute way to ensure safety and task efficiency. Just look at military (special) forces all over the world, it has been a proven concept for a long time. Much later, other diving organizations adopted this standardization and team approach too.

Q: You are obviously very well known for Ghost Diving, but what other diving do you do when you are not retrieving ghost fishing nets?

A: Every now and then I do some wreck and reef dives but most of my dives these days are focused on marine conservation. Even my hobby vacation diving often ends in cleaning up marine debris, and of course, fishing gear. In addition to this and Ghost Diving, we are regularly asked to use our approach and skills for other organizations and their goals. For example, we carried out various assignments with our voluntary teams for larger nature conservation organizations such as Greenpeace. In some cases, this involved surveys and cleaning up lost fishing gear, but also scientific research, sampling and other environment-related inspections were among our diving objectives. It is probably already clear: my dives should have a purpose and that cannot be challenging enough as far as I am concerned.

Q: Talking of Ghost Diving, how did the non-profit organisation come into being?

A: Back to 2007, the time when we increasingly dedicated our North Sea dives to cleaning up lost fishing gear. It started to stand out among environmental organizations, and we were offered funds in exchange for cooperation in projects. A good deal for us, we did what we did anyway, but now our costs

Pascal also gets involved in scientific diving



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A Ghost Diving team at work on a huge net



would be covered by external partners. In 2012 I got the idea to internationalize our activities and I started looking for more information on this topic and other initiatives that may already exist in the world. This turned out to be very limited and we started a foundation called 'Ghost Fishing' with its own website that bundled all existing information, news articles and similar initiatives. With this we wanted to help everyone who, like me, was looking for more information on this subject. At the same time, we were still operating as an organized technical diving team, but now under the same recognizable name. We gained a good reputation through our work and soon we were approached by diving teams all over the world interested in our concept. We started setting up local groups in many other countries and called them 'chapters'. Our shared goal is to remove lost fishing gear and make the world aware of issues caused by this so-called 'ghost fishing gear'.

Parallel to all this, in 2013, with the collaboration of our diving organization another initiative called 'Healthy Seas' was born. This initiative focused on the recycling and upcycling aspect with the help of two different material sources; our diving teams together with the fishing industry who returned their end-of-life fishing nets to us. This also became a great success and soon many commercial partners that had

an interest in these materials were involved into marine conservation. Suddenly we had more funding on top of a good destination for our salvaged fishing nets. A win-win situation.

After almost a decade of working on this topic, we realized that the phenomenon 'ghost fishing' became more known worldwide. Exactly what we wanted to achieve; people became more aware of what goes on underwater. This also made us look at ourselves, an organization that bears the name of a phenomenon (ghost fishing) that described a specific problem was no longer desirable for several reasons. Firstly, because the term was now really used everywhere and it was no longer about our organization, secondly because we felt that we now should focus on the solution instead of the problem. 'Ghost Diving' was born, we renamed ourselves by replacing only one word and with this we immediately took away the questions around us from some outsiders who wondered what exactly we were doing as an organization, 'are you fishermen...?'. All chapters involved in our global mission followed us, and we all transitioned at the same time to a partly new, but more appropriate, identity. Just as you would expect from a real team.

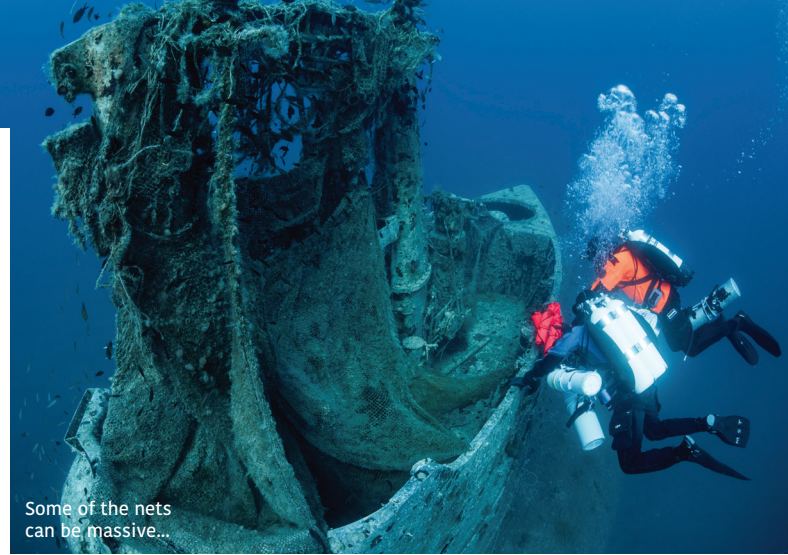
Q: Tell us a bit more about the process divers go through when it comes to retrieving a 'ghost net' from the seabed? It must be an operation fraught with potential dangers.

A: Well, it sure is. To be honest, we rather try to discourage people from removing fishing nets because after years of being active in this work, we know that for many of the people we take with us, it is too much task loading and they drop out immediately or after a few dives. In addition to the long list of things to take into account in the field of safety, there are also weather and underwater conditions that can make the work more dangerous. Add to that the fact that visibility ►

is often reduced to almost-zero because we move objects that have been underwater for a long time already. A notorious saying in our briefings is 'visibility is optional', indicating that you better expect the worst scenario down there. In brief, if you are still very focused on your 'diving skills' during this work, prepare yourself for a catastrophic experience.

Q: What 'training', as such, do the Ghost Diving team go through before heading off on these net-removal operations?

A: Glad you ask. As the topic becomes more widely known, divers are also showing an interest in getting involved. We understand this, but remain realistic to them: This work is not just another way to enjoy yourself underwater. A fishing net can kill a human in the same way it does an animal. When divers want to join our net removals, we first set the requirement that they must be a technically trained diver. The reason is that in most cases they are familiar with diving in teams and in terms of equipment, procedures and standards, they are also ready to be seamlessly integrated into our teams. We are not going to teach you any of this, it is your foundation to start. If you want to do the work we do safely, contact an experienced team anywhere in the world and become part of that team. Dive with them, train with them and get to know them. After that, you perform this type of work very regularly, experience many different situations together and learn with and from your team. Remember that a solid team must be forged through training together and getting to know each other to operate smooth and safely, this is a process. Only this way can we guarantee that people can blindly 'read' and trust each other in all possible situations. We do not believe in courses as they are designed for teaching diving skills or equipment, not for this kind of dangerous work. That is why we hold our breath every time we see promotions of courses to become 'certified' in removing fishing nets. It just does not work like that. We have standard operating procedures and new divers are trained internally by our core teams after spending enough time with them as a member of the team. This takes place both above and below water and even maritime safety drills will be part of this cycle. After all, we work at sea!



Some of the nets can be massive...



...and this is why removal operations can be so dangerous

Q: How can people get involved with Ghost Diving, either fundraising for your next operations, or actually getting involved at the sharp end of ghost net removal?

A: I just realized that I might have come across as a bit demotivating, but that should not stop anyone. For anyone who sees all the above as a great challenge, do not hesitate to contact us. For the rest, we also have good news, as we also plan to include recreational divers in our projects for certain tasks who will, of course, use modified, much-lighter procedures. Keep a close eye on our website and social media about these plans. Do you want to support us in a different way or as a non-diving volunteer? Please contact us too.

Q: We recently ran a news story about the organisation purchasing its first boat, the Mako. Tell us how having this vessel in your arsenal will assist in your operations.

A: We adopted Mako from Scotland, where she served as a dive charter from Anstruther for several years. With having our own vessel, we can significantly increase the number of diving trips per year, which means that our organizations will operate more efficiently in the North Sea in the Netherlands. But we can even expand our projects to Belgium, Germany and possibly the United Kingdom in collaboration with other local teams. More than that, we can expand our awareness raising and educational events by organizing small workshops on board. The possibilities are endless, we are ready. ▶



Pascal dealing with monofilament netting



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Q: As usual with our Q&As, what is your most-memorable dive?

A: Vema Seamount, without a doubt. In the autumn of 2019, we ran a project with Greenpeace Germany and Africa to map the state of this sea mountain. At the summit we went looking for lost fishing gear but only found it a little bit, we spent the rest of the time doing scientific research that varied from taking kelp and underwater samples to audio recordings of cetaceans. Because this seamount is located 1,000km offshore northwest of Cape Town (South Africa), the area has hardly been dived and that was clearly visible by the rich flora and fauna that we found on site. Every dive was a gift, we literally dived into the unknown.

Q: On the flipside, what is your worst diving experience?

A: I cannot really name a specific dive but for myself, the dives where we could not reach our goal for whatever reason, are not satisfying. The worst are those where a mistake is made, one that could have been avoided by just following our plan and procedures. I am quite a perfectionist in this area.



Pascal (right)



The Ghost Diving team work in murky green water...



...and clear blue water, wherever there are nets

Q: What does the future hold for Pascal van Erp, Healthy Seas and Ghost Diving?

A: With Healthy Seas, we work very hard to find more and more solutions for the materials we collect with divers and fishermen. This is not an easy process, but every year we make bigger steps in this with very nice partnerships. The main concern for us is to ensure that the materials are removed from underwater, everything that is possible with these materials afterwards is the next step forward. For a few years now I have been working as a diving and maritime coordinator for this organization and it is very satisfying to bring all parties together and to produce something beautiful and good out of it.

With Ghost Diving we, of course, like to expand further, but only with safety as a starting point. We prefer quality over quantity. Any lost fishing net can (and will) do a lot of damage to nature and should preferably be removed. But never at the expense of a human life. If you do this properly it is a fantastic and very challenging way to dive.

For me personally? I think I have already said enough about myself - I will continue to do what I am doing because this is my ultimate passion. I am fortunate to have been able to turn my hobby into my job by working for Healthy Seas and volunteering for the Ghost Diving organization. I have nothing more to wish. ■