

Dewey Livingston:

Don, what was your impression after first facing this incredible place?

Don Dvorak:

Well, I didn't feel quite crazy, but it always was on the back of my mind that it's dangerous. But if we cruise out, we're on the bank, the weather looks good, we find a place to dive, we deploy the descent line, and Bob says, "All right, suit up. We're diving," and it takes a while to get your gear ready and get your camera. But all the time you're thinking, "I'm gonna be diving deep. Is there gonna be a current?" and you kind of get little butterflies in your stomach.

That's not to say I didn't want to go. I wanted to go, but there's always that feeling. You're in a foreign environment, and when I was down there I never felt as if I belonged there. I'm going to have to leave. I'm in a serious situation. But after you get your equipment ready, you get your gear on, and they say, "Okay, jump off the boat. Get in the water. Go," all those feelings went away. Now, my focus is on the task at hand. One is to get down the line and start my picture-taking.

Safety was always, always stressed. I've been on three dives where the dive was never completed. If somebody felt they didn't want to be there any longer, that's the most important thing. We terminated the dive, and that's fine. That is the most important thing.

I'm on the descent line, and Bob says, "Go down slowly. Do not rush down there. Let yourself get used to the depth and get used to the narcosis." We all knew we were gonna be under the effects of narcosis. You get to the bottom, take a moment to look at your dive buddies, see if they're doing okay, get acclimated to the bottom, gather your thoughts and then go about your business. And that technique worked. When I was down on the bottom, I knew I was under the effects of narcosis. The first effect is tunnel vision, and because we had trained so much, he wanted to monitor your depth, he wanted to monitor your time and your air, so I would find myself doing this like every 30 seconds, looking at my gauges, looking at my depth, looking at my time. That's what my mind was programmed to do, but I continued on taking my pictures. And when I was down there, I also got this feeling – there's a little bit of current flowing over the bank.

It's manageable, and I do not want to follow the current flowing over the bank down into the abyss. That's in the back of your mind, but was really not a serious thing.

It's just what your mind does to you when you're under the narcosis. And I remember the bank just burst forth with all this color. There's the yellow, the oranges, the purples, the reds, and that's what I'm seeing. But that's not what is there. You lose all your reds, but my mind under the narcosis puts those back, and those colors might just jump out at you for a fraction of a second when your flash goes off. So I think your mind retains that. But it's just amazing to see the abundance, because it was just such a competition for a little niche where I can build a house and grow, and you'll just see the tunicates surrounding the hydrocoral and just taking over the neighborhood.

It's just very expensive real estate, essentially. But that's one of the pictures in my mind there. And again, it's just the safety that's the most important thing. And after your dive is completed, after 15 minutes, you just go up slowly, and the narcosis goes away. And depending on your depth, you might stop at 30 feet. We always over-decompressed. You never can go wrong by overdecompressing— 20, 30 and 10. And at 10 feet, I'm hanging off there, there's no more narcosis. Now I'm aware of how cold it is. When you're under the narcosis you don't feel the cold.

I'm hanging on the T-bar and just kind of shivering and trying to feel my fingers to see if they're still there – the numbness – and you try to take your mind off that. You might look out for any drifters, plankton or **mola molas** drifting by, or you might play paper, stone, scissors with your dive buddy, but there was always somebody topside there looking after you. There was always a safety person. And when we were on the decom, they would come down and grab our gear and just kind of look at us, make sure our pupils were okay or something – but you know, they were just there for our safety.

And finally, you got back onboard, and you have a chance to think about just what happened. It was difficult for me, because I got these terrible headaches from deep diving, I guess from the excess carbon dioxide. They would last for a couple of hours. I said, "Bob, I don't think I'm gonna dive tomorrow," and then in a couple hours, "Bob, okay, I'll dive tomorrow." But the whole

back of the boat was just filled with enthusiasm. People would just say, “How did it go? Give me a description. Debrief. Let’s look at your samples. Let’s put them into the formalin, and let’s separate them.”

But I’d like to talk a little bit about the people – the divers. Now, we’re on a boat full of divers, full of gear, and a lot of the people were somewhat new to us. But never do I remember any real conflicts. We were all just had the one point of view of what we needed to do. And it was a fun group.