

Diver's Alert Network Internship Final Report

Andrea Krzystan

September 20, 2006

Diver's Alert Network Internship Final Report

Well into my last semester at Eckerd College, I was hoping to have a definite answer to that one question every senior was being bombarded with nonstop; “What are your plans for after graduation?” I too had been searching for what seemed like forever and had applied to numerous programs and jobs to do after graduation. However, right near the end of the year, while many of my classmates were trying to figure out where they would end up, I was lucky enough to find out exactly what I would be doing. Thanks to a summer internship from the Our World Underwater Scholarship Society, I had the opportunity to be an intern with the Diver's Alert Network.

Due to the hectic atmosphere during my last few weeks as a college student, I barely had time to think about my upcoming internship. However, before I knew it I was on my way up to Durham, North Carolina to begin the internship training week at the Diver's Alert Network headquarters. I was the last to arrive so that night the only person I met was one of my fellow interns who was to be my roommate for the week. We talked for a little while about what to expect but neither of us had any idea just how much we were going to learn over the next several days.

The next morning all of the interns and a couple of guests headed over the DAN building from our hotel. We met up with the research staff and had the grand tour of the DAN offices. After meeting just about everybody around the office and getting a quick introduction to each department we were all beginning to realize that DAN is so much more than your basic insurance company. With a staff of only about eighty full time

employees the Diver's Alert Network runs every one of their services right out of their office near the Duke University campus in North Carolina.

They are involved in diverse projects such as publishing their own member magazine, Alert Diver, developing creative advertising and promotional products, and collaborating with the nearby university in cutting edge dive safety and hyperbaric medicine research. The most amazing aspect about this organization is that they accomplish all of these things and so much more while, at the same time, providing expert, around the clock medical assistance to divers nationwide. The remainder of the week included various presentations on DAN, dive safety, and recent developments in dive research and science. We also had the chance to try out a rebreather apparatus one night in the pool which was an amazing experience. In addition to all of these other very exciting activities we received training about the Project Dive Exploration program which was our main reason for the trip to Durham.

Project Dive Exploration is a program started about eight years ago by the research team at the Diver's Alert Network. In order to promote the PDE program, the summer internship program was created. Since its inception in 1999 over 70,000 dives have been collected from dive spots around the world by dedicated interns and other divers who are committed to contributing to dive safety research. The interns are trained as Field Research Coordinators (FRC's) and are responsible for recruiting volunteer divers, spreading knowledge about the PDE program, and organizing the collection and submission of data to DAN. Data is collected through small dive computers that record the time-depth profile information for each dive while attached to the volunteer diver's BC. Along with the computer profiles, each diver fills out paper work that describes their

health, dive history, and details about each individual dive such as their comfort level and whether or not they had any problems during or after the dive. When this information is compiled into the PDE database it can provide valuable insights into the causes of decompression illness and help researchers to learn more about the physiology of recreational diving.

At the end of the week everyone was well equipped with all of the information we would need to carry out our mission over the next few months. In addition to our new knowledge we also left with a stack of business cards, brochures, and research papers which would ensure we would never have to go without an answer to any question that might come our way. As all of the other interns headed off to major dive destinations such as Utila in Honduras, Scapa Flow in Scotland, or the Cayman Islands, I was on my way back to St. Petersburg, Florida where I would be based out of for the duration of the internship.

Since St. Petersburg is not known as a huge destination in the diving world it may seem odd that I would be stationed there to complete an internship about diving. When people think of diving in Florida, spots such as the Florida Keys or freshwater areas such as Crystal River are usually what come to mind. However, the Tampa Bay area does have its fair share of dive spots. There are wrecks offshore in the Gulf and even in the Hillsborough River that are known to locals. The reason I was staying in St. Petersburg, where I had just finished school, was that in addition to the internship I was offered by the Our World Underwater Scholarship Society I was also offered a full time job. Thankfully, everyone with the Diver's Alert Network, the Our World Underwater Scholarship Society, and my future employer were very flexible and we worked it out so

I would not have to pass up either of these amazing opportunities. The plan was to find a local shop to work with to increase the amount of data from the Gulf Coast of Florida that goes into the Project Dive Exploration database.

After settling into my job, I set out to find a local dive shop to work with. I began my search on the DAN website where I located several shops in the area that were already DAN business members. I contacted a few of the shops to see if their operations would match up well with the PDE program. In the beginning of my search, I did not have very much luck due to the fact that many of the shops mainly organize dive charters to other, more popular dive destinations around Florida. Finally, a week or two into my search, I came across a local shop, the Tackleshack, whose staff was very enthusiastic about participating in the PDE program.

The Tackleshack is a full-blown water sports store that has been in the dive business for quite a while. In their dive shop they offer tank fills, gear maintenance or repair, retail dive gear, as well as training courses. Many of the divers that come through the shop are spear fishermen as that is a very popular activity in the area. Others come in every once in a while for a tank fill or to shop for some new, hi-tech dive gear. I spent most of my time hanging out at the shop on the weekends where I would catch potential volunteer divers as they came in for a quick visit for one reason or another. Most of the divers I spoke to about the program were very receptive when I approached them about participating in the PDE program. After explaining the aim of the program and issuing them their paperwork and their very own Sensus Pro dive computer I would wish them well as they headed off for their diving adventure. The volunteers would then return their

computers and paperwork the next time they stopped by the shop so I could enter their data into my laptop computer and send it to DAN.

A few of the divers and staff at the shop even expressed interest in continuing to participate in the program on their own. I directed these dedicated divers to the DAN website where they can download the same software I was using and send in their dive profile information directly from their own dive computers. Although I did get a good number of volunteers signed up, there was one downfall of the method I used to collect dives from the customers. A problem would arise every now and then where a diver did not completely fill out the forms or something, such as a medication, was not clearly described. It was difficult to track down the clarifications from the divers since I did not see them on a regular basis. The store manager and I did our best to get all the answers we needed so I am very pleased with the quality of data that was collected from the recreational divers, spear fishermen, and divers in training at Tackleshack.

In addition to having the chance to work with lots of great people at the Tackleshack throughout the summer, I also had the chance to take a trip down to the Keys to do some scouting work for the research staff at DAN. I was ecstatic when it was brought up that I would have the chance to go diving in the Keys because on my last trip down there I was not yet a certified diver. The intern coordinator at DAN had contacted a couple of shops near Key Largo that were considering hosting an intern sometime in the future. My job was to go down for a long weekend and show them how the program works and to see if the site would be a suitable location for an internship placement. After a somewhat stormy drive down from St. Petersburg I arrived at my destination. The next day I met up with the dive operations manager at Cristal Clear Charters. Cristal

Clear works with hotels throughout the Keys to organize various water activities for their guest. Within this operation they manage several dive shops throughout the Keys.

After a tour of the shops in Key Largo and Islamorada I had the chance to go out on a dive to see how things were run out on the water. During good weather, Cristal Clear sends out dive boats all day long to popular spots on the local reefs and wrecks. There are a wide variety of dives available to the Cristal Clear customers who usually come down for a vacation that lasts about a week or so. The next morning in Key Largo I went out on one of the larger boats where I recruited the boat captain to introduce me to the group. Before we left the dock, I introduced myself, explained what the PDE program was, and asked for volunteers. Within ten minutes of leaving the dock I had handed out all but two of the dive computers I had brought with me on the trip to eager volunteers. Most of the volunteers were members of a dive club out of Ft. Myers who were on a trip for the weekend. There were going to be there through the next day doing several more dives so most of them decided to hold onto the computers and donate all of their remaining dives to the program. This was really exciting because I could collect a good amount of data over a short period of time. After a great set of reef dives we headed back to the dive shop where word spread quickly about the program and I handed out my last few computers. By the next morning's set of dives a couple of the computers had been returned. This time I was going out of the shop in Islamorada to do a few deep dives and once again quickly handed out the remaining computers. The next day in the Keys was going really well and it was really fun to get a chance to speak with some of the other people working at the shop between the morning and afternoon dives. When we returned after the last dive of the day we found out that there had been a tropical storm watch

placed for the Keys due to Ernesto coming in from the Caribbean. A few hours later the local government issued a mandatory visitor evacuation for the Keys, which was unfortunate since I had planned on staying another two nights down on the islands. Even though none of the locals were very concerned about the approaching storm, I decided to leave that night to try and avoid the traffic from the tourist evacuation. Although the trip was cut short, it was still very successful. The shops I visited looked to be ideal locations for a DAN intern to work out of due to their frequency of trips, very helpful staff, and the amazing variety of diving, of course.

Looking back over the last few months as the Our World Underwater Diver's Alert Network intern everything was just as exciting and fascinating as I imagined it would be when I first applied earlier this year. Between meeting so many great people, learning all about dive physiology, and contributing to an important research project the internship program provided me with an overall great experience. Before diving this summer as part of the internship, it had been almost a year and a half since my last dive. The internship helped me to revive my passion for diving and I will hopefully never go that long between dives again. While working to become and stay an active diver I will no doubt be a smarter and safer diver after my involvement in this program and its knowledge intensive training week. Over the summer I also had the chance to gain more experience in participating in scientific research which will be invaluable as I hope to continue my education through at least the graduate level.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone at the Our World Underwater Scholarship Society, the Diver's Alert Network, the Tackleshack, and elsewhere who made this great experience possible. I was very honored to represent these

organizations over the summer and responded to my nickname the “DAN girl” with pride.