Environmental guidelines for underwater photography judges

Underwater photography involves immense skill and can be a great tool for sharing the wonders of the underwater world. However, underwater photographers are on average more likely to damage coral reefs and other important marine life than any other type of diver. A study by The Reef-World Foundation, *"Recreational Diving Impacts on Coral Reefs"*, found that photographers are much more likely to have both unintentional and intentional contact with marine life.

This is often the price paid by our precious ecosystems in order to capture the 'perfect' photo. It is our responsibility to celebrate photographers who can create great art without sacrificing the environment which we all benefit from.

In order to assist the judges for ADEX's 2025 photography competition, Reef-World has created these 4 simple tips to use as guidance for judging the entries:

1. **Consider whether the animal is exhibiting natural behaviour or are there signs of manipulation**
   Moving or manipulating marine life in order to get the 'perfect shot' is commonly observed globally — a practice that causes stress to marine life and can erode the ecosystem's health. Judges should reward photographers who capture natural animal behaviour instead of staging a false environment that can harm the wildlife we are here to celebrate.

2. **Look out for signs of marine life stress**
   Interference may cause stress to marine life, disrupt their natural behaviours or force them to display defensive characteristics. Whilst certain animals' defensive characteristics have been popular for photographers to capture (consider the 'puffing up' of a puffer fish or the flamboyant cuttlefish exhibiting their colourful display), prolonged time in this stress state can cause long-term harm to the animal.

3. **Observe for signs of habitat disruption**
   Is the habitat natural or could the marine life have been moved to another setting? Does it seem like the photographer has kept a respectful distance from areas that have an important role in that habitat? Does the photographer practice neutral buoyancy and have all their gear tucked in? Cleaning stations, in particular, are really important areas

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for an abundance of marine species, but it's important that the photographer stays a good distance to not disrupt the animals that congregate there.

4. **Discourage feeding / chumming**
   Feeding marine life can change their natural behaviour, disrupting the delicate balance of the ecosystem. For example, sharks can become dependent on chumming as their source of food, causing them to become detached from their natural habitat. This can lead to the destruction of the reef itself and the incredible array of life it supports.

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