

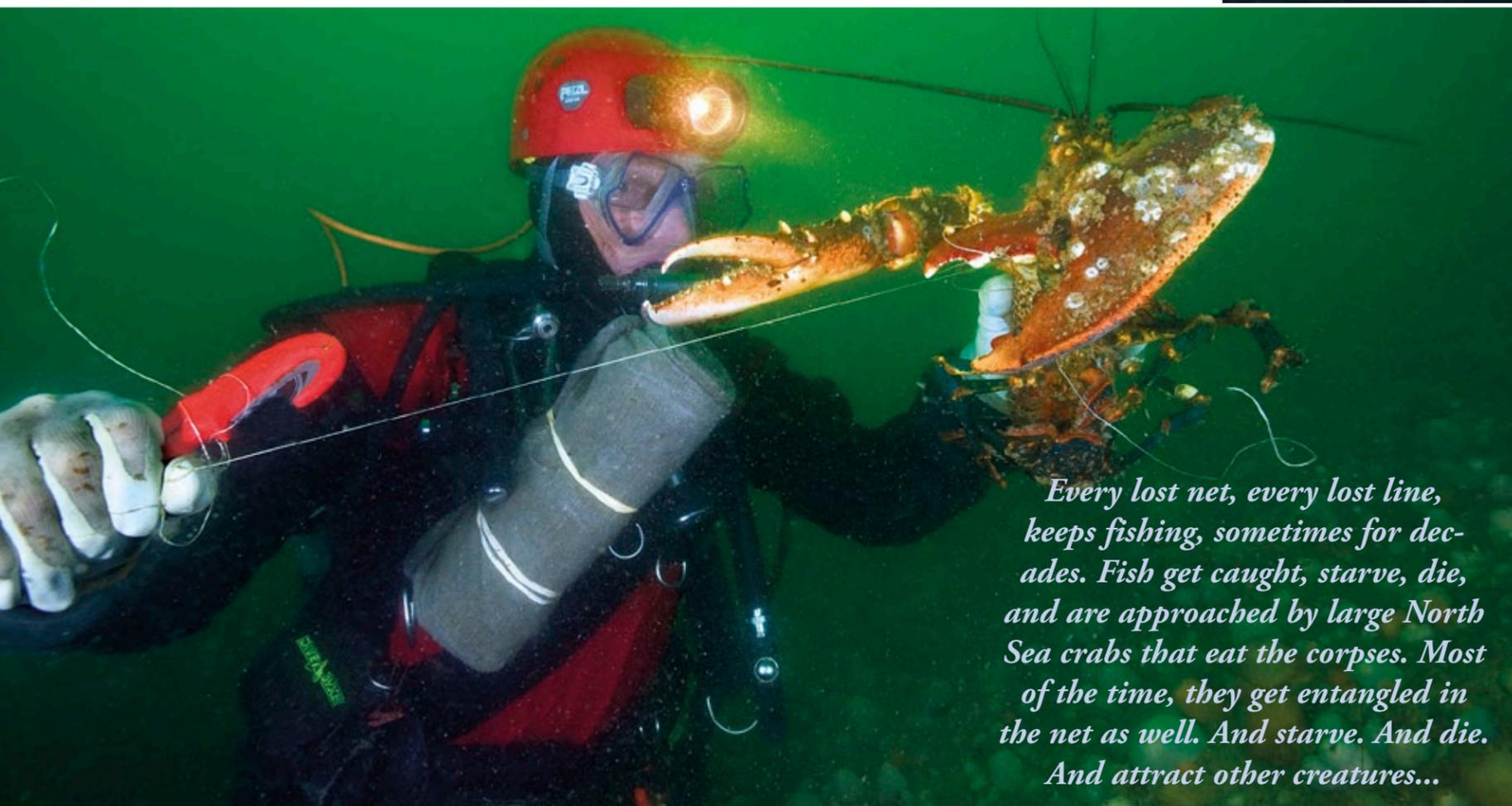
Ghostfishing

adventure

—Discarded, lost nets keep on fishing even after they have been relieved of duty

It is the nightmare of every diver who dives the Dutch North Sea—getting entangled in a fishing line of old net, unable to free yourself. The Dutch wrecks are becoming an ever popular destination for both the fishing and diving industry. A threat to both, fishing boats and anglers can lose their nets and lines on wrecks, and divers can lose their lives. This year, a new project was initiated to clean the wrecks of their burdens of abandoned fishing gear—*Duik de Noordzee Schoon*, or Dive Our North Sea Clean. This summer, photographer, Peter Verhoog, was a member of the project team and captured the beauty and the dangers of adventurous diving.

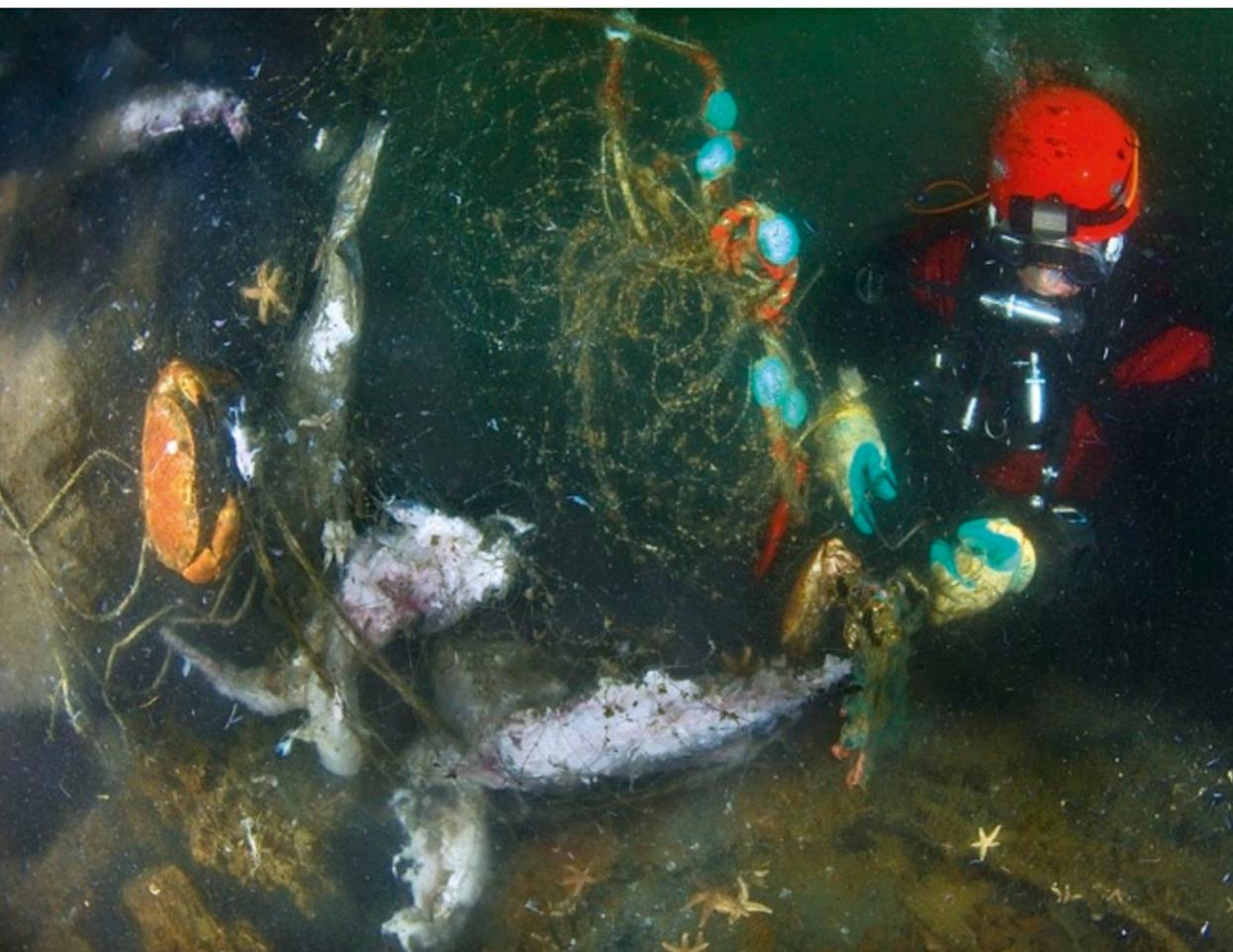
Text and photos by Peter Verhoog



Every lost net, every lost line, keeps fishing, sometimes for decades. Fish get caught, starve, die, and are approached by large North Sea crabs that eat the corpses. Most of the time, they get entangled in the net as well. And starve. And die. And attract other creatures...



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: In good visibility, a net can easily be found; Crab, unable to move, forever caught by a copper pipe and fishing lines; Ben releases a lobster from a fishing line



Diving the North Sea is always an adventure. Even though the weather can be unpredictable, more and more divers have started to explore the wreck sites each year. But wreck diving can be dangerous, too. I have dived the wrecks of my North Sea for over a decade now, and I have seen the number of lines, hooks, sinkers and nets explode. On several occasions, my slow swimming exploration over a wreck was suddenly interrupted—something held me back. It could be a line, a line and hook, or a fine-mesh net that was almost invisible. The only solution was getting out a sharp knife and cutting the lines or net—a task that can be daunting under low visibility and in a tidal current. Most of the time, I needed the help of my buddy to survive. As cod and flatfish are becoming scarce in the Netherlands, an ever increasing

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Divers descend along the anchor line to the wreck; Divers swim by a fishing net; Peter jumps off the ship for a photo dive on the wreck of the *Elbe*; Ben cuts a dangerous, thin fishing net from the wreck



number of people try to make extra money by fishing on the wrecks. For them, there is no quota, as officially, they are not professional fishermen. At a profit of over seven euro's per kilo, wreck fishing is a great hobby and the large boats that leave almost every weekday are crowded. The catches are mostly composed of undersized cod that are not even sexually mature, which goes to restaurants and are also sold privately.

But angling is not only a threat to the fish. Every year, an estimated 100,000kg of poisonous lead are left behind in the sea, as many anglers lose their lines, sinkers and hooks. The professional fishing industry fishes with the nets as well, and use standing nets and dragnets on the sandy floor around the wrecks, which are occasionally left

behind, as one wreck or another refuses to let them go. None of those visitors have a clue as to what is going on underwater once they have departed.

When they head back to port, a tragedy unfolds. Every lost net, every lost line, keeps fishing, sometimes for decades. Fish get caught, starve, die, and are approached by



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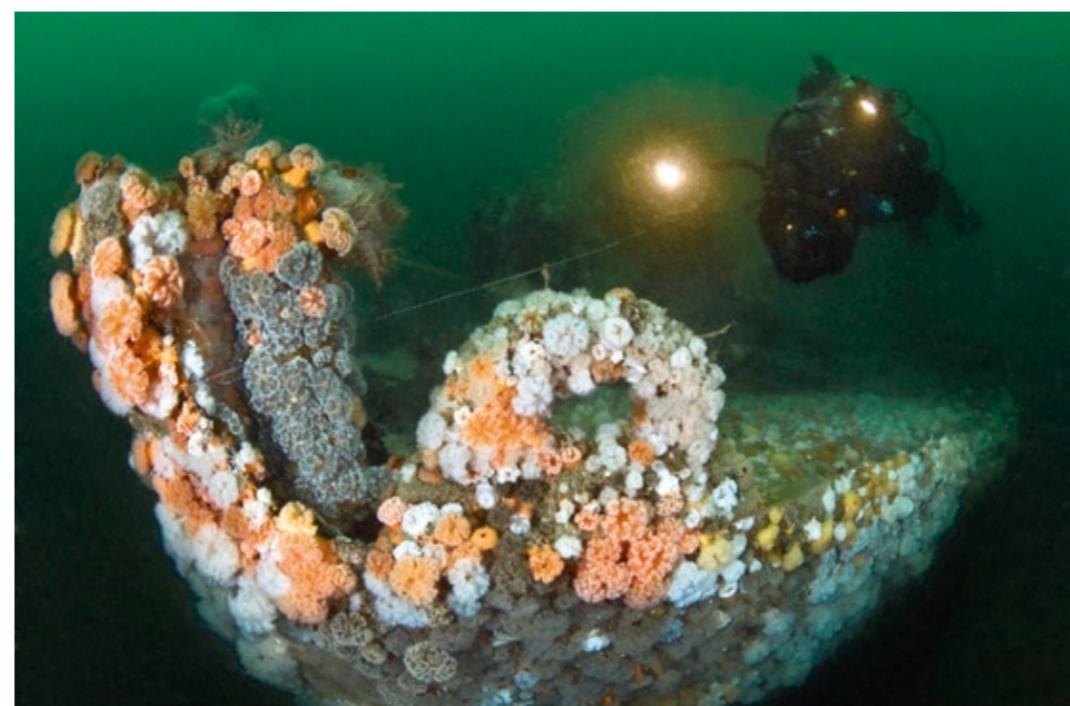


THIS PAGE: Scenes from the rescue dive

RIGHT: Snagged by wreckage, a fishing net remains left behind by fishermen



THIS PAGE: Scenes from the rescue dive
 ABOVE: Anemones at the boulders of the *Queensfort*. RIGHT: The bow of the *Queensfort* with camerawoman Klaudie



large North Sea crabs that eat the corpses. Most of the time, they get entangled in the net as well. And starve. And die. And attract other creatures.

The North Sea is a shallow, sandy sea, and the wrecks form artificial reefs that justify their

unnatural presence by the wealth of marine fauna they attract. But some wrecks are completely covered in layers of nets and are now barren ruins of the fascinating biotope they once were.

Rescue team

Any North Sea diver has witnessed these events. My wife, Georgina, and I regularly freed crabs, cut lines and removed parts of net. But to be honest, our fellow divers were more interested in exploring the wrecks and their artefacts than saving creatures.

Luckily, there are now more people who have come to the rescue of the innocent crabs and fishes under the surface. The people of the project, Duik de Noordzee Schoon, have been cleaning nets for one and a half years now, and their efforts are beginning to pay off.



THIS PAGE: Scenes from the rescue dive. TOP LEFT: 23-pound bombs near the wrecks. TOP RIGHT: A crab can hang on a fishing line for weeks. ABOVE: A bow with portholes

Klaudie Bartelink and Ben Stiefelhagen, the founders, have succeeded in putting together a group of dedicated divers, who receive free training and free clean-up trips on the condition that they commit themselves to cleaning wrecks during those dives.

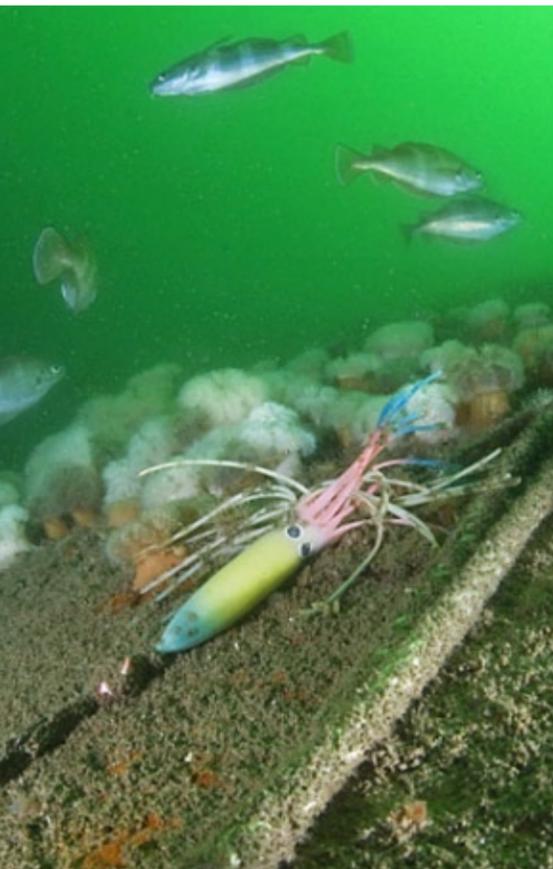
Klaudie and Ben have also funded the project with their own money, but are now partly supported by a Dutch foundation.

As they were also planning on publishing a book, they asked me to be an added extra member of their team this summer—an invitation I gladly accepted! I documented their training and their dives and witnessed them rescuing countless animals and removing many, many lines, hooks, sinkers and nets.

Extra benefits

It is easy to blame anglers and the fishing industry. Most people who enjoy a day of fishing on the North Sea are





THIS PAGE: Scenes from the rescue dive. TOP RIGHT: Ben cuts fishing lines from the wreck

absolutely unaware of the havoc they cause. Ben and Klaudie therefore contacted the largest sport-fishing association in Holland to discuss options and proposed the use of biodegradable lines, like Bioline™.

Normal fishing lines are made of monofilament, which can take over 500 years to decompose. Bioline will degrade in five years. The partners are also investigating the possible use of biodegrad-

activities.

And I had a great summer not only witnessing work being done for a good cause but also enjoying the wonders of my North Sea from a different point of view, capturing unique images.

For more information, visit: www.duikdenoordzee-schoon.nl (Dutch only) or Peter Verhoog's website at: www.peterverhoog.com ■

ABOVE: Ben and Marc with a net with a lot of crabs stuck in it
RIGHT: Crab in an ammunition box with cordite

able nets and ceramic sinkers and have also made arrangements for a "pick-up service". Captains of fishing boats who have lost a net can contact this service, so the net can be retrieved.

The project attracted a lot of publicity and even received a prestigious Dutch nature prize, which can partly fund next year's

