



opinion



Constructive Paranoia

— A Safety Strategy

Text by Simon Pridmore

A young ornithologist was on an expedition in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, leading a team of New Guineans. They climbed through the forest until they reached a level where they were to spend a few days studying birds. The young ornithologist selected a site for their camp beneath a huge forest tree, its bark covered in thick moss. He asked his companions to build a sleeping platform there but they refused. He asked "Why?" And they told him that the tree was dead and they were afraid it might fall on the camp during the night and kill them.

He tried to reason with them but they were adamant and eventually they

all agreed on a different site far away from the tree. The young ornithologist was initially annoyed and thought the New Guineans were exaggerating the danger. However, over the following months, he noticed that at least once a day he would hear the noise of a tree falling in the forest, and at night, he would listen to his companions telling stories of people who had been killed by falling trees.

He calculated that, on average, New Guineans would spend about 100 nights a year camping in the forest. Even if the probability of a tree falling on them and killing them were low, the more time they spent in the forest the more likely it was that they would become a victim. The New Guineans could not completely avoid the risk of falling trees by not going into the forest. But they could certainly minimise the risk by not sleeping underneath a dead tree.

The ornithologist noted that tales around New Guinean campfires of how people had come to harm or just avoided disaster particularly fascinated the children, and he guessed that they constituted an important part

of their education. He concluded that the community's obsession with safety was an essential cultural survival tool that contributed significantly to keeping them safe and labelled it "constructive paranoia."

The young ornithologist was Jared Diamond, and today, he is a celebrated and much-published academic and author. I found the story about falling trees in his book, *The World Until Yesterday*, in which he looks at the few tribal societies remaining today and examines their behaviour, procedures and strategies.

Technical divers

Any technical diver reading this will immediately get what Jared Diamond is writing about. Although they may not use the actual phrase, technical divers employ constructive paranoia as a survival technique. They address the real risks of diving up front. They know how the technical divers who went before them got hurt and have developed procedures and equipment to reduce the chances of this happening to them too.

Technical divers also talk constantly

about safety in scuba diving. They exchange stories and question techniques and equipment configurations in excruciating detail. When an accident takes place, they are hungry for information on how it happened—not out of some ghoulish fascination, but so that they can analyse what took place and compare it to what they do to see if the accident points up any deficiencies in their own procedures.

Debate is a significant feature of this branch of scuba diving and the technical divers are doing exactly what tribal societies do. The Internet dialogues are their campfire chats. There is a constructively paranoid safety culture that pervades technical diving that New Guineans would completely understand.

Sport divers

Over the years, technical divers have passed onto the mainstream diving community many innovations including octopus hoses, BCDs and, more recently, sidemount diving. However, unfortunately, they have not passed on their constructive paranoia, and this sort of mindset is significantly lacking

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in mainstream scuba diving and diver training.

Here is a story that illustrates the point perfectly. One day, a friend of mine named Robert received a call from a woman who introduced herself as a friend of a friend. She asked him for advice on diving Nusa Penida, an island off the southern coast of Bali, famous for big fish, but also notorious for strong, unpredictable currents that make it an accident black spot.

Robert asked about her experience and the woman told him that she and her husband had only just learnt to dive. On hearing this, Robert pointed out that diving around Nusa Penida could be tricky and suggested instead that they try some of the wonderful diving in easier conditions at Tulamben on Bali's north-eastern coast. The woman was highly indignant at Robert's implication that she and her husband were "not excellent divers—which we are" and hung up on him.

Two days later, she called Robert back to tell him that she and her husband had gone to Nusa Penida and that they had had a great day's diving. "So there!

Everything you were telling me was wrong," she said. Robert just told her he was glad they had enjoyed their dives.

Falling trees

When I heard this tale, I was of course immediately reminded of Jared Diamond's story of falling trees. The woman and her husband had evidently graduated from their initial diver training with no idea of their limitations as new divers. Nobody had told them that many popular dive sites around the world are genuinely dangerous for beginners. They were apparently also not aware that all new divers need to ease themselves gently into the sport, and that it actually takes a lot of practice to become an "excellent diver." Nobody had taught them to be at all "constructively paranoid" about their diving. Instead, all the high praise they had received during their training seemed to have encouraged them to believe that, having obtained their certification cards, they were now ready to dive anywhere.

Today's beginners' courses rarely incorporate concepts such as situational awareness and defensive diving. Yet,

these are crucial survival tools. In the hierarchy of diver training courses, such things are not addressed until divers begin training at technical or professional levels. This means people who never graduate to these levels remain ill-prepared for diving.

What can we do?

What can we do about it? On a personal level, we as divers can read more widely about dive safety and think more about the way we dive, potential threats to our safety, and what we can do to anticipate and avoid risk. Those of us who work in diving can focus on developing a constructive paranoia culture within our own particular sphere of influence. We can counsel divers on how to spot which dive operators adopt a safety culture and which do not, tell them the right questions to ask and show them the tell-tale signs to look for.

We can work on developing a constructive paranoia amongst the divers we teach, guide a sense of self-preservation and show them how to take control of their own diving. We can also press training agencies to lay greater emphasis on a culture of dive safety in early diver training programmes. The Divers Alert Network has been campaigning on a similar line recently. We have to hope the agencies take note. ■

Simon Pridmore has been part of the scuba diving scene in Asia, Europe and the United States (well, Guam) for the past 20 years or so. He is the bestselling author of *Scuba Confidential: An Insider's Guide to Becoming a Better Diver* and has just published a new book entitled *Scuba Professional: Insights into Scuba Diver Training and Operations*. Both are available from Amazon in a variety of formats.

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