by Keith Cardwell

Killer or Keeper?

Underwater hunting and collecting; if it moves shoot it, if it doesn't, shove it in your catch bag! Ah! Those were the days!
(Reflecting on diving during the 1970s-80s.)

Early in my diving career, and to increase class sizes, I had posters designed hoping to inspire folk to dive with what I saw as the prime reason that the diving Kiwis I knew wanted to do it: to kill stuff and eat it.

Bugger the whales, mantas, dolphins, nudibranchs, chrinoids and other hard to spell stuff; it was crays, scallops, and absolutely anything that was edible and could fit into a catch bag.

But it didn't take long to see that many of the folk in the late 1970s-early 1980s who signed up to learn to dive saw other reasons for blowing bubbles. In fact, there was an ever-increasing number showing interest in that hard to spell stuff, looking at wrecks, going to different places and taking photos. This looked a lot more interesting to teach and keep/get people interested in diving. I collaborated with Dr Roger Grace, Dr Andy Veale and Ian Francis to produce several specialty courses covering Marine Biology, Underwater Photography, Rescue (yes, it was positioned as only a specialty then) and Wreck diving. These courses were ratified by New Zealand Underwater Association at that time.

In keeping with this now obviously more eclectic range of interests, there still remained a desire by many to kill things and even though by now I had sympathy for both types of diver, there was something that niggled. The thought of trying to stop all divers from catching, killing and eating stuff is preposterous. And the cost of getting into underwater photography then was not as easy as it is now, so for many, there was no choice. After all, you couldn't eat celluloid.

I was starting to shake my head too often when cruising past those heart-pumping crevasses containing feelers that promised tea but turned out to be the underwater equivalent of an amputee clinic. Crays aplenty; but no legs, feelers, too small and obviously no defences left from predators. They couldn't sense when you were threateningly close and they couldn't scramble away.

So what to do? An Underwater and Hunting course! A great compromise if constructed sensibly and catering to both killer and greenie. The course consisted of a choice from five dives, of which, a student would have to choose two. These dives were: locating and catching crayfish; locating and catching shellfish; spearfishing and also killing something on the run; bottle collecting; and finally, catching local freshwater fish (tiddlers) and setting up an aquarium. So a choice was available to be a killer or a keeper. Obviously all of this was with reference to, and observance of, all laws relevant to these activities.

However, the criticism came in thick and fast. Derided by both the killers who believed and argued that the public was being ripped off by being asked to pay to learn what they could teach folk in a weekend or three for free (really? Just how much do these weekends cost and do you really want to have new divers slowing you down?) and by the greenies for promoting an activity that meant death to something (would you prefer new divers to be a little more selective and preserve something or should we let them continue on hammering pins in with a sledgehammer?). It was as futile as arguing evolution against a creationist.

Curiously enough, after laughing off the extremists and keeping on track, it was interesting to watch the trend move from folk wanting to kill to those wanting to keep, until a point was reached where there were no more killers enrolling and the course was relegated to only two dives; bottle collecting and setting up an aquarium. Bottle collecting is as far as it goes with me now.

About the time that I trained my last killer was also the time (and not so long ago) that one major training organisation dropped their support of this type of activity.

But I still think there is a place for extra training for those who wish to kill. Sounds awful doesn't it, so now what to do? See you on blog space @ ...