

The Big Picture...

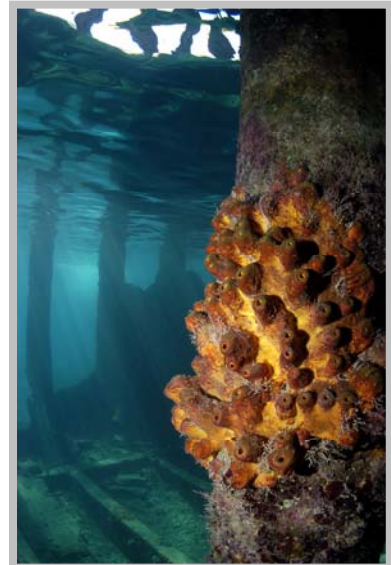
The Fundamentals of Close Focus Wide-Angle Photography

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Wide angle underwater photography is an attempt to capture and share a moment of beauty and wonder in a place that few people get to see or experience. The challenge as a photographer becomes trying to bring together the various elements we see underwater into a single cohesive image. An image that communicates to the viewer the essence of what it would be like to be there at that moment. Dramatic images like this grace the covers of magazines every month to excite readers about a place or story.

Of the various approaches and techniques to wide angle photography perhaps one of the simplest to master is Close Focus Wide-Angle (CFWA). Combining the breadth of a wide angle lens with the rich colors and details found in macro photography CFWA presents endless opportunity for creativity. With some practice and good technique it won't be long before you start to see stunning images.

Essential for CFWA photography is a good wide-angle lens with a minimum of 90 degrees of coverage. As the name implies whichever lens you choose must be capable of focusing at close distances, a minimum of 12 inches, and provide at least 90 degrees of wide angle coverage. Digital SLR photographers have a many lens choices available; my personal preference is the Nikon 10.5mm fish-eye or the Nikon 12-24mm wide angle zoom. There are also options for point-and-shoot cameras; several manufacturers make wide angle and fish-eye supplementary lenses that can be adapted to fit most P&S housings.



A unique characteristic of CFWA images is the perspective distortion inherent when using wide-angle lenses up close. A common style of image places a sponge in the foreground with a silhouetted diver above. Since the sponge is within a two feet of the lens it has the appearance of being gigantic; many times larger than the diver when in reality the might only be a couple of feet in size. This altered perspective can give an average subject, such as a small sponge or sea fan, some dramatic appeal. Presenting the common as uncommon and remarkable is when photography starts to become art.

CFWA is a relatively easy technique to learn, by using the following these simple steps you will start seeing positive results in no time.

- Step 1.** Find an interesting subject to fill the foreground. Subjects can range from sponges, anemones and reef formations to turtles and frogfish. It's important to remember to get close, very close but the subject should not fill more than 50% of the frame. Consider the area negative space behind and around the subject, can you add any other elements such as a diver or fish.

Step 2. Get low to shoot at extreme upward angles. Look for photo opportunities where you can be below the subject and shoot up to include the sun. However since you are shooting at extreme upward angles you will have to compensate by using a smaller f -stop. It depends on water clarity and the position of the sun but typically CFWA images are shot using $f11 - f22$.



Step 3. Once the aperture is set, meter the background water. Use the shutter speed to control the exposure of the background water. To achieve the rich Caribbean Blue that is common in many pictures I will typically underexpose the background by 1.5 – 2.0 stops.

Step 4. Position the strobe(s) to light the subject. Although a small strobe might be effective in the area, a wide angle strobe will really excel. The larger strobe will put out more light which is necessary given the f -stop we are using. A wide-angle strobe will also have a wider beam of coverage to light more of the subject especially at such a small camera-to-subject distance.

Step 5. Take the picture, recompose, repeat step 1. If the subject is worth one shot, it can be worth two. Remember to bracket your settings and composition, this technique leaves a lot of opportunity for creativity. Minor adjustments in strobe position can change mood and impact of the image. Always leave time to experiment.

Close Focus Wide-Angle photography is a very powerful technique that you can use to take something that people see everyday and present in a way that new and unique. The high “Wow” factor it can add to your pictures is a great reason to learn and practice CFWA on your next dive.