

Fish Faces

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For those of us that live in Florida getting to the Keys could not be easier, some of my favorite reefs in Key Largo are only an hour from Miami. The Florida Keys are an underwater photographer's paradise combining gin clear waters, endless coral reefs, world famous wrecks and an abundant fish life available for year round enjoyment. Every year millions of divers come to visit the 3rd largest coral ecosystem in the world which covers 2800 nautical miles.¹ The impact of this many visitors every year also means the Keys are also home to some of the friendliest fish in the Caribbean.

That being said let's face it; fish do not like to have their picture taken. They won't hold still, can't follow direction and generally swim away from the large bubble blowing diver with the big laser blasters that keep flashing light at them. It is for these reasons I, like many, have an exceptional and growing collection of fish tail pictures. However, the shallow reefs of the Keys allow me to spend plenty of bottom time working on one of my favorite photographic techniques; fish portraiture.



Taking portraits of fish can be quite challenging. But there are some simple, practical techniques you can use to improve your fish face pictures. This type of photography can be accomplished with most point and shoot cameras as well as SLRs. One or two external strobes are necessary to provide flexible and creative lighting options to help bring out the unique colors and features of your fish's face.

It is said "The eyes are the windows to the soul" and keeping the focus on the eyes will help the viewer connect with your subject whether it is a two-year old child or Rock Beauty. Capturing the eye in sharp focus is essential to making a compelling fish face image. This is not to say that the eye is the only feature that should be in focus however, if the eye is not focus the image loses its impact with the viewer.



¹ Environmental Protection Agency, Coral Reef Initiatives, 9/1/2005, <http://www.epa.gov/OWOW/oceans/coral/initiative.html>

One of the advantages of diving the shallow reefs of Key Largo is being able to take the time to study the fish I want to photograph. By taking time to study your subject you can anticipate where the fish is going to be and you can plan your composition. Chasing your subject will yield limited results, pick your spot and let fish come to you.

Do not be afraid to experiment with different compositions, head on, tilted, vertical or horizontal. More important is to choose an angle that separates the fish from a cluttered background. Try an upward angle and use the blue water background for nice separation. If you prefer to shoot at eye level make sure you choose a background that is not too strong and won't compete with your fish face.

The one angle to try and avoid is down. Shooting at a downward angle typically will result in an uninteresting picture mostly because your fish will be lost in the background. Think of it like talking to children, you can make a better connection if you come down to their level than if you just look down on them. If you want the viewer to make a connection with your fish face avoid the downward look.

Fish have wonderful colorful faces that come in all shapes and sizes so fill the frame. Try to get as close as you can to your fish. In addition to a full frame your strobes will really bring out the colors of the fish, and the less water between your subject and the camera will result in sharper pictures.

The majority of the photographs people take underwater are of fish; a good fish portrait is a great addition to any portfolio. Digital cameras let you review your images as they are being made so take your time and check your results, in the end patience and perseverance will pay off. Just remember:

1. Make sure the eyes are sharp.
2. Fill the frame, get close.
3. Photograph at eye level or upward angles.
4. Pick your spots.
5. Try different compositions.

