



Documenting wrecks and
caves in an effort to give

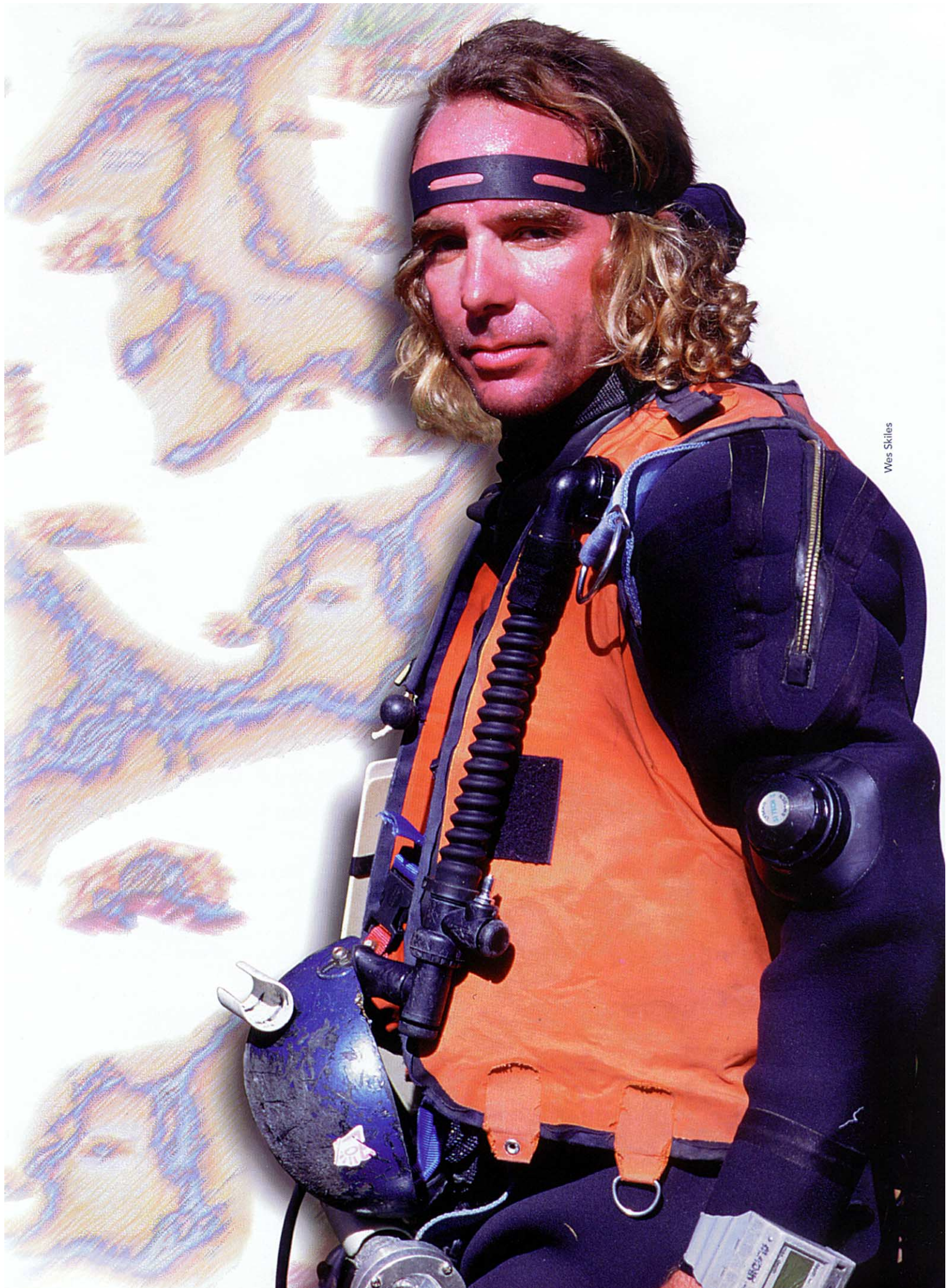
The Cartography of Eric Hutcheson **By WINREMLEY**

others an appreciation for their often solemn beauty is an activity that has been common among divers from the very beginning. Wes Skiles and Terry Begnoche, for example, have developed an almost mystical ability to capture the personality of caves and wrecks in still photography. Underwater photographers, videographers and cartographers, over the years, have produced photos, drawings and videos that give the viewer detailed images of what sunken vessels, reefs and cave systems look like. No one, however, has acquired the unique blend of art and science found in Eric Hutcheson. Eric's style of artistic creativity combined with the hundreds of hours he spends collecting detailed survey and measurement data, have produced some of the most astounding, technically accurate renderings ever produced of wrecks and cave systems.

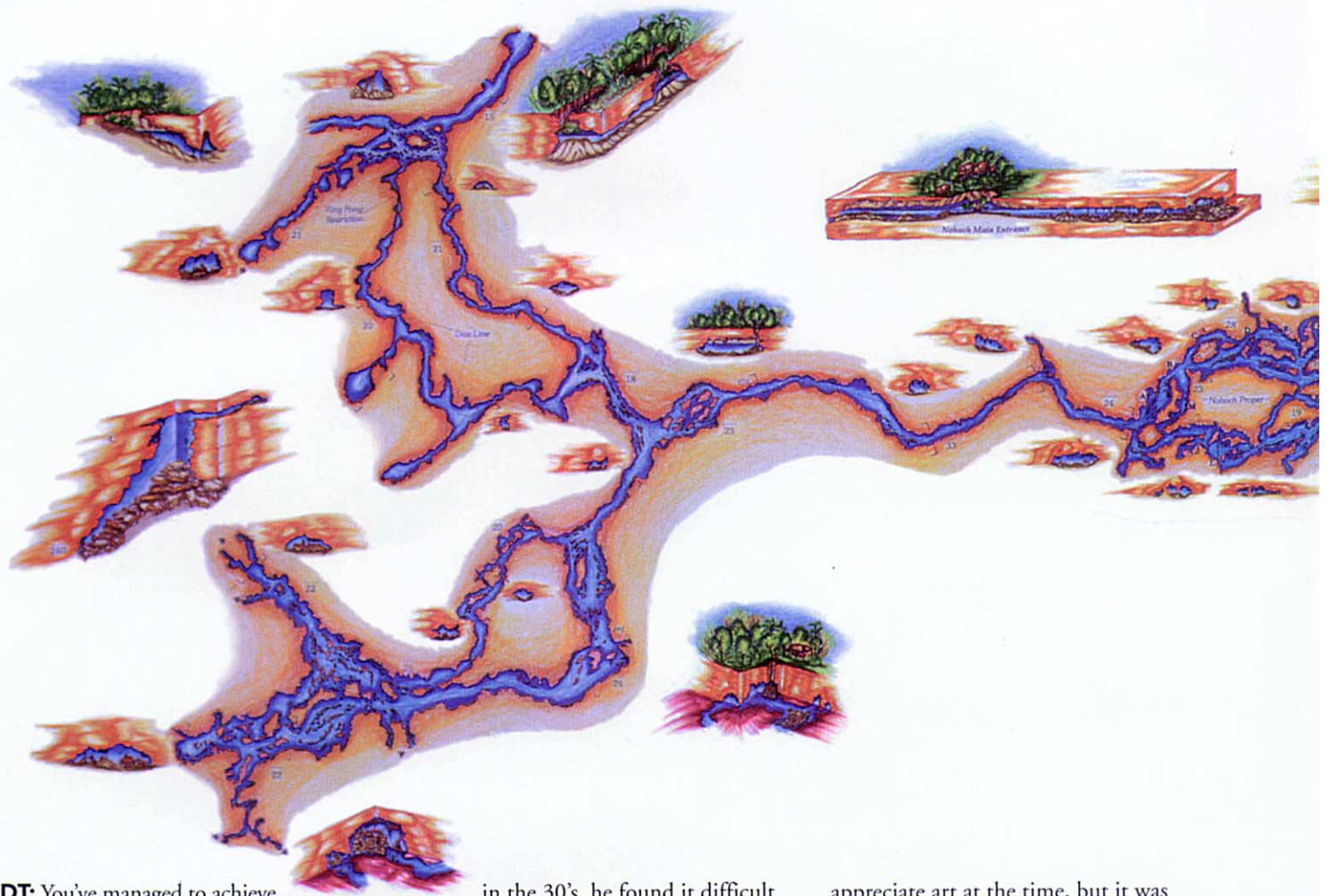
Eric's drawings of underground aquifer systems are routinely used by archeologists and geologists in the study of their respective sciences.

Eric is 34 years old and lives in beautiful Ocala, Florida with his charming wife Sharon and seven year old daughter Erika. With his long blonde hair and colorful personality, he looks and acts every bit the part of an artist. For those who are unfamiliar with Ocala, it's horse country. Virtually all of the country roads are lined with sprawling, grass-covered horse ranches and natural forest areas. To the West and North of Ocala is the cave diving holy land of North-Central Florida. This is the area where Eric's art first began to flourish.

Eric's art studio is an unusual combination of drafting tables, large drawings laying everywhere, and dive gear (lots of dive gear), arranged around the walls of the studio. There's a stereo and a large pair of speakers in his studio as well, which Eric listens to while he produces his artwork. Next to the stereo is a stack of LP albums (remember those large black vinyl discs) with titles from Edgar Winter, Pink Floyd, Ted Nugent, Led Zeppe-lin, Johnny Winter, the Allman Bros. and Dixie Dregs. It was here in his studio that I first met Eric. He has an energetic, colorful personality and he quickly endears himself with the people that he meets. Eric graciously agreed to do the following interview with DeepTech and supplied us with copies of his artwork.



Wes Skiles



DT: You've managed to achieve a rather unique blend of creative art and cartography. Eric, how did that come to be?

HUTCHESON: That's an interesting question. It's one that many people ask me. The best answer is that I just fell into it. There were three or four chance experiences from my past that set me up for this career. I'm grateful for the opportunity to make artistic, historical documentation of the explorations that I've had the pleasure to be involved with.

DT: Do you have formal art training?

HUTCHESON: No, I don't. I was fortunate that my grandfather was a skilled and talented artist. He decided that of all his grandchildren, I should be the one to carry on with this talent. He loved art, but as an artist in Miami

in the 30's, he found it difficult to earn a living selling his paintings and drawings, so he took a job doing architectural engineering. Many of the art-deco buildings and bridges built during that time were based on his concepts. A lot of those structures have

appreciate art at the time, but it was kind of fun. It's not really what a ten year old kid in Miami wants to spend his time on. I mean I was living in a tropical paradise. I wanted to go surfing, go fishing, and play with the girls.



Hutcheson sketches a large room while surveying Nohoch.

Wes Skiles

DT: Did you get into diving while you were still in Miami?

HUTCHESON: Well, I dabbled in it. Diving wasn't really big back then. There were a few TV shows being made around Miami that had to do with diving. I remember seeing the sets for Flipper and The Creature From the Black Lagoon, they were pretty neat. Some of my friends and I got started in diving by coming across a scuba tank and trying it out.

DT: How did you come across a tank at the age of 10 in Miami?

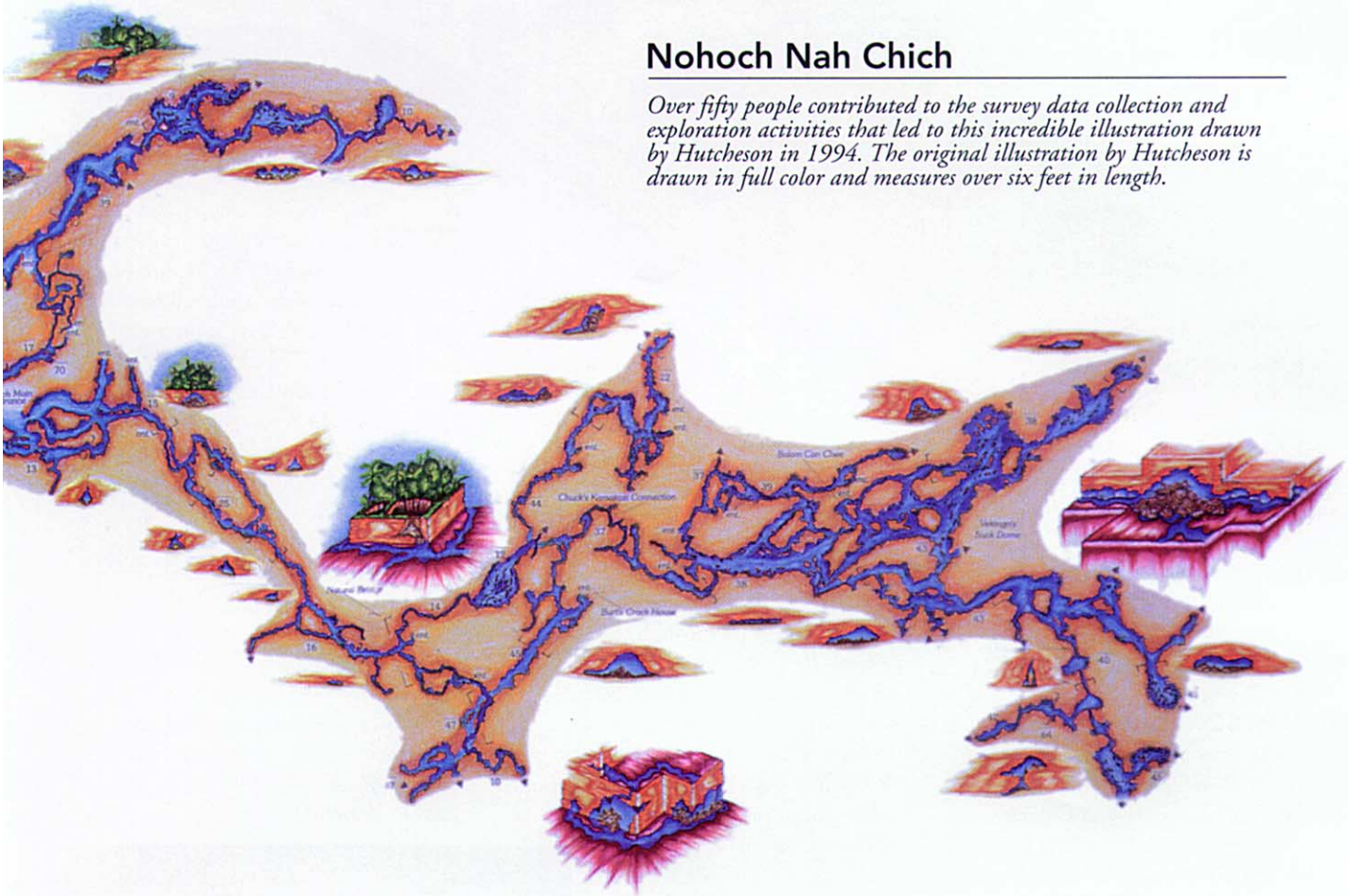
HUTCHESON: You're going to drag it out of me aren't you? Well, to build the roads, expressways, and bridges in Miami, they dug these huge rock pits

since been torn down, so his drawings are now historical documents.

He was the one who first inspired me to start drawing. He would sit me down, and hand me the tools, and show me how to do it. I didn't really

Nohoch Nah Chich

Over fifty people contributed to the survey data collection and exploration activities that led to this incredible illustration drawn by Hutcheson in 1994. The original illustration by Hutcheson is drawn in full color and measures over six feet in length.



mining raw materials. They dug them so that they could eventually be used as lakes and canals later on when housing communities were built. After the houses were built and the rock pits were turned into canals and lakes, the homeowners all bought boats to keep in the water. One of the things that we like to do late at night was to sneak onto these boats and swipe the fire extinguishers so we could have fire extinguisher fights and spray that white foam stuff all over each other. Usually the guy who found the largest fire extinguisher won the fight. One night I found the largest fire extinguisher I'd ever seen, except that it had a strange hose and funny nozzle on the end of it and it would only spray air—no foam. One guy said “hey, that’s a scuba tank like on Sea Hunt.”

DT: So you swiped a scuba tank thinking it was a fire extinguisher.

HUTCHESON: Yea. The next day we played with it a little. You could obviously see where to put it in your mouth so we tried it and jumped in the

lake—no mask, no fins, no nothing, just a pair of shorts and a scuba tank under your arm. It was my first experience with “no-mounting”. We thought it was unbelievably cool. We played with that scuba tank for a day or so, and when it was out of air, we threw it into the woods and that was that.

DT: When did you really get into diving, aside from jumping into rock pits with “fire extinguishers?”

HUTCHESON: I was always into water sports, snorkeling and breath hold diving. We used to help salvage companies pull ditched cars from the bottom of the rock pits doing breath hold dives with hundred pound chains. We wrapped the chains around the axle of the car, and these big cranes would pull

the car from the bottom. They would sell them for scrap metal. I made a little money showing these guys where the cars were and wrapping the chains around the axles for them. Then my sister put an end to it.

DT: How did she do that?

HUTCHESON: I was standing on the bank of this rock pit with the guy that owns the crane. I had a 100 lb. chain and I was getting ready to jump off the side to hook up a car when my sister showed up and cursed this guy up and down. She basically called him a dirt bag for hiring a kid to jump into the water with 100

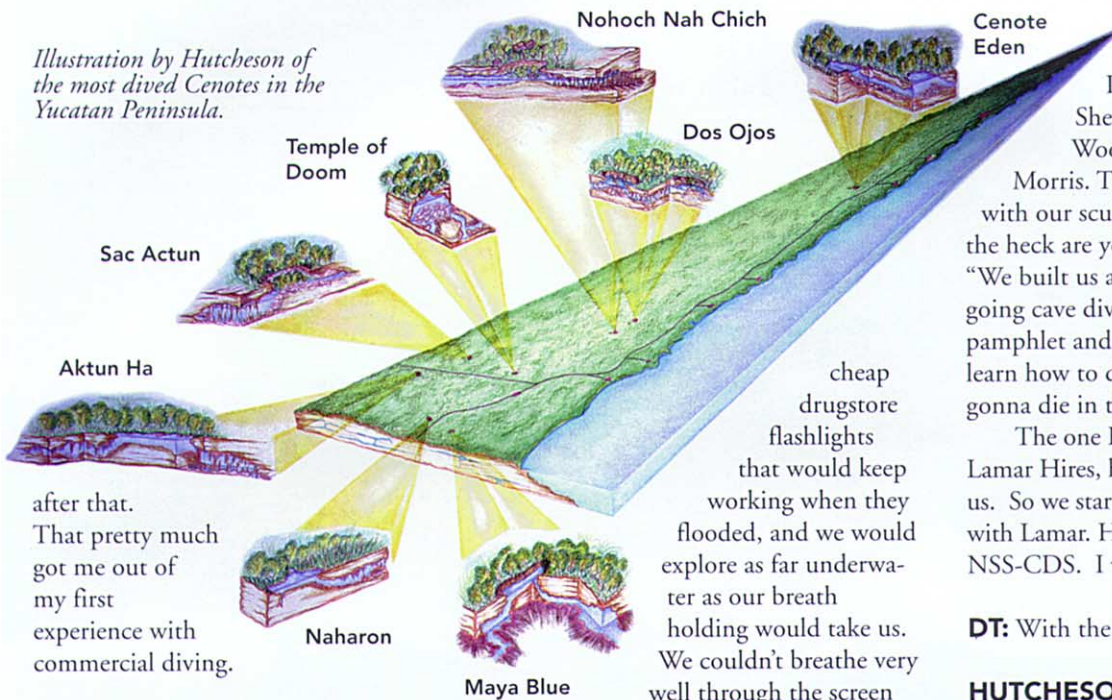
lb. of chain around his shoulder. He probably wasn't the greatest type of guy anyway. She scared him, and that was the end of my paying gig for pulling out these cars. He wouldn't hire me



Clay layer in Silver Spring near Ocala, FL

Tom Morris

Illustration by Hutcheson of the most dived Cenotes in the Yucatan Peninsula.



after that. That pretty much got me out of my first experience with commercial diving.

DT: When did you move to Ocala?

HUTCHESON: I moved to Ocala in 1976 when my family relocated here. I was about 14 years old at the time. I was devastated. Here I was a surfer from Miami stuck in the sticks with nothing to do. No beaches, no girls, and rednecks everywhere.

DT: Did you start diving then?

HUTCHESON: Eventually. I met Ken Peakman who was about my same age. We began exploring the dry caves around the area with wax candles and kite string to find our way out. Ken would blow out the candles, laugh and say, "Now find your way out!" I hit my head on the wall 400 times.

DT: These were all dry caves?

HUTCHESON: Yes, the ones we explored were. They were dry until you descended down through the fractures and eventually hit the water table. You could travel at the water table where the passages would be half dry and half wet. It was almost as much fun as fire extinguisher fights.

Occasionally we would get to where the water table cage stopped and it would completely submerge. We brought snorkels with us with screens rubber-banded to the opening to keep rocks and dirt from falling into the snorkel and choking us. We also used

cheap drugstore flashlights that would keep working when they flooded, and we would explore as far underwater as our breath holding would take us. We couldn't breathe very well through the screen

covered snorkels and we would hyperventilate and almost pass out. We were lucky we didn't kill ourselves.

My mother was worried about us so anytime she would see a newspaper article about cave diving or cave exploring, she would cut it out and show me that there were people doing this on a legitimate basis. She suggested we call them and get involved. It was mostly the Florida Speleology Society. We overheard a group of excited explorers talking one time about surveying a cave system and finding old candles and string left there by early explorers a long time ago. Kenny and I didn't have the heart to tell them it was us. At that time we didn't want to map the caves—we just wanted to take girls down in there.

Eventually I did get an open water scuba certification though. It was about 1983. Mostly so we could have fun exploring the wet caves farther than we could by breath holding.

DT: So after you took your first open water scuba course, you started diving the sumps and the caves immediately?

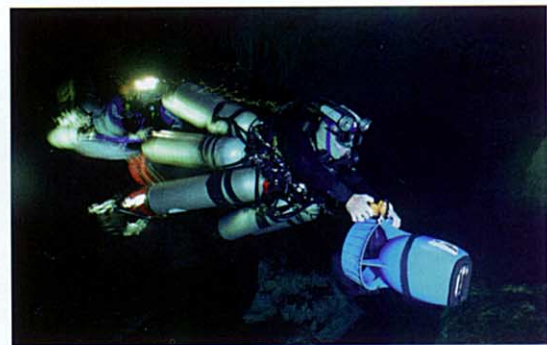
HUTCHESON: Yes, we did. We went to places like Devils Den when it was still a cow field and Peacock Springs also. There were people there diving on

a professional level. People like Wes Skiles, Sheck Exley, Lamar Hires, Woody Jasper, and Tom Morris. They would run into us with our scuba gear and say "What the heck are you kids doing?" We said, "We built us a cave diving rig and we're going cave diving." They handed us a pamphlet and said, "You really need to learn how to do this right or your gonna die in there kid."

The one I remember the most is Lamar Hires, he really grabbed a hold of us. So we started taking these courses with Lamar. He introduced us to the NSS-CDS. I was really impressed.

DT: With the NSS-CDS?

HUTCHESON: Yes. I was really impressed with their professionalism and with the NACD also. These guys were going out and diving and exploring with detailed plans of exactly what they were doing and why, and bringing back useful information.



Eric Hutcheson with Mike Madden "drafting" behind to minimize drag while pushing Nohoch.

Wes Skiles

DT: When did you first start drawing pictures of the systems you were diving in?

HUTCHESON: It was shortly after I started working with Lamar Hires. I saw the maps that he, Sheck Exley, and Wes Skiles were producing. Then it hit me, like "Hey, I love these caves. I bet I could draw one of these maps."

DT: Which was your first map that you drew?

HUTCHESON: The first one that I published was Silver Glen Springs. A whole group of explorers and I worked

for 8 or 9 months between 1989 and 1990 exploring that system. It was mostly side-mount, hard-core diving. I produced a map and published it. It was pretty well received. I used many of the techniques my Grandfather taught me and created kind of an "artsy" drawing of the system. I wanted to produce a map that someone who doesn't know what a cave looks like could look at and say "This is cool, yeah this is where it goes up, and this is where it goes down, and this is where the water flows!"

DT: You wanted to give people a sense of what it was like to experience the cave?

HUTCHESON: Exactly, I really wanted to show everyone what gets my motor running while diving the caves, and I wanted to do it the way my Grandfather drew the old buildings and bridges in South Miami, with artistic style and lots of accurate technical detail.

DT: You've also documented wrecks with your art. When did you start that?

HUTCHESON: That came a couple years after I started drawing caves. I've always loved the ocean. Diving wrecks and documenting them with art was a natural. Caves, wrecks, reefs, it's all the same to me. The problem is finding the time for wrecks. Every time, it seems, that I make plans to do a wreck, a cave project comes up and I'm off and running for months at a time.

sketching the site on slates. That's the fun part. I also back up my research with still photography and videotape to help fill in the blanks.

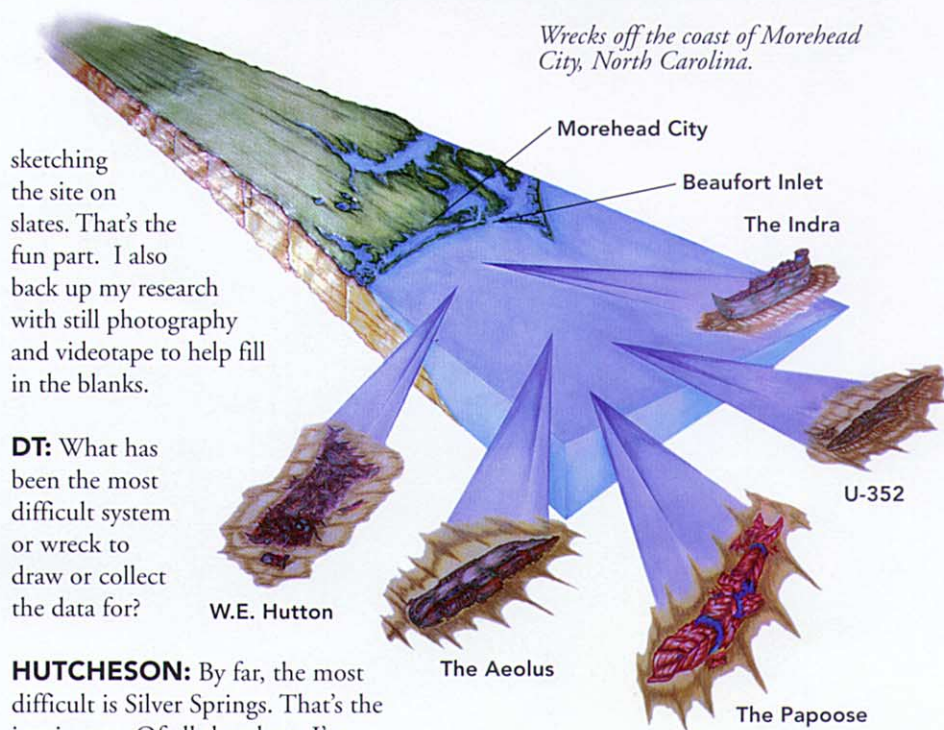
DT: What has been the most difficult system or wreck to draw or collect the data for?

HUTCHESON: By far, the most difficult is Silver Springs. That's the ironic part. Of all the places I've surveyed and drawn, the hardest was one of the first that I attempted.

DT: What makes Silver Springs so difficult?

HUTCHESON: It's the restrictions and complexity. Silver Springs is a diversion maze created by a single, large underground spring that somehow became obstructed. The water needed a place to go so it flowed up through another layer of geology in dozens or maybe even hundreds of smaller tunnels that seem to intertwine and branch off everywhere. We are still looking for a connection to the main line. It's a

Wrecks off the coast of Morehead City, North Carolina.



drainage-pipe sized tunnels. Plus much of it is unstable and crumbly. Rocks and stuff are always falling on your head in there. And I'm talking rocks, not little pebbles.

DT: There is a lot of hype in the media about rebreathers, is this a tool that you anticipate using at some point to continue your work?

HUTCHESON: Oh, sure. I look forward to the day when I have regular access to some really good equipment like that. How could it get any better? The number one restraint is time and air. Rebreathers are the answer to that. Plus, if I could find a way to use one in Silver Spring, then there would be no bubbles to knock the rocks loose that fall on my head.

DT: What projects do you have in the works?

HUTCHESON: I've got several neat projects in the works, I don't like to talk about them until I'm at the drawing stage though. I just want to do what my grandfather did. He inspired me and left me a lot of material to work with. Someday, I'd like to go back to Miami, and spend a year at the various dive sites there and create a show at a museum displaying my work. It's sort of a way for me to honor the gift that my Grandfather gave me. 🙏



Eric Hutcheson squeezing through the Silver Springs system using his "no-mount" technique.

DT: How do you actually go about collecting the data for your drawings?

HUTCHESON: It's a combination of survey techniques, measurements, and

bizarre, twisty, tight system, with tunnels running everywhere. The problem is that most of it is no-mount diving. You have to push your tank through ahead of you and wiggle your way through small,

Bill Foote