

THE AWESOME PHOTOGRAPHY OF WES SKILES

To most divers the name Wes Skiles is as familiar as Dacor or Scubapro. His photos of underwater caves, sumps and dry caves have appeared in virtually every dive and cave related publication in existence.

Wes's films are also becoming as legendary as his still photography. He routinely dives with explorers as they make record pushes into some of the world's longest caves in Florida, Mexico, and the Caribbean. He films these events real-time as they happen. This means, of course, that Wes's own diving skills are refined to the explorer level. His newest film "Ocean Spirit", airing soon on PBS, differs from his past work in that most of it was shot in open water. Interestingly, the film features Grateful Dead drummer Bill Kreutzmann as one of the divers.

Wes is 37 years old. He lives in the cave-holy-land of North Central Florida. He's an instructor for both the NSSCDS and PADI, and he has been diving since he was ten years old.

Recently Wes was kind enough to take time out of his busy schedule to talk with DeepTech about his life, diving and, of course, his awesome photography.

DT: How and when did you get started in diving Wes?

Wes: I've had a strong fascination for the underwater world ever since I was a kid. The thing that influenced me most, cliché as it sounds, is all those old episodes of Sea Hunt. I remember jumping out of the tree in my front yard onto the ground and then swimming across the grass visualizing what it would be like to be a diver. I dove for an entire year as a kid in pools with a mask skirt, no face plate, just the skirt and mask strap. I thought it was totally cool just to have the skirt.

DT: How old were you then?

Wes: I was probably about seven at that time. When I was eight, the YMCA offered a skin diving course

and I signed up. The instructor, Bob Axlerod, took an interest in me. After completing the course he started calling my parents and saying "we're going out to the springs for scuba checkouts and if Wes wants to come along we'd love to have him. I know how much he loves the springs." I would go with Bob and the scuba classes, but I would just go as a snorkeler. After awhile Bob started letting me use scuba and he started showing me how to breath off a regulator. I made my first dive when I was ten using a little set of tiny doubles in Troy springs.

DT: How did you get into technical diving?

Wes: In the late 60s and early 70s I had a neighbor down the street, Kent Markum, who was an inventor of underwater stuff. He built small submarines and other gadgets. Many of his inventions were featured in various publications like Skin Diver and Popular Mechanics. His first subs were small one and two man wet/dry subs. I totally got into helping him build them. I was still a kid, but I was fixated on Kent Markum's house. Other kids were running around and playing Cowboys and Indians while I was sanding fiber glass in Kent's garage. Kent also built an early scooter that he called a Scuba-Tow. This predated even Farallon's stuff.

When I was old enough to go to the springs I went to Ginnie. I was twelve or thirteen then. The photographer from Popular Mechanics had a bunch of scuba gear and he was going to photograph my brother and I using Kent's Scuba-Tows and he said there's the stuff, pointing to the scuba gear. I put it on and jumped in the water and dove all day long in Ginnie. This was back when Ginnie was a back woods hole, completely surrounded by forest. My brother said, "Don't go in the cave." I said,



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Wes Skiles after a dive on a Mk IV rebreather.



"I remember having agonizingly sore muscles from hanging on to an aquazep with my legs. I had a light in one hand a camera in the other, scootering down the tunnel filming the push team 4,000 feet into Wakulla at a depth of 320 feet. You know what I mean If you've ever seen divers on aquazeps with their tanks attached under the scooter and they're hanging on with one hand and driving the scooter with the other, plus all their regulators and reels. I'm behind them or in front of them, geared the same way, only I'm driving my scooter with no hands taking pictures."



Explorer Liz Wight explores within the underwater passages beyond the Concorde chamber.



Lamar Hires explores cave passage in Peacock Cave wearing his new TransPac Side Mounts.



Mark Long and Tom Morris pause briefly at the bone bed during a deep penetration into Wakulla.



Bill Stone pushes the limits of the Huautla Cave System using his Mk IV Rebreather.



In swimming-pool-clear water, Jeffrey and Ruby Haupt begin a scooter cave dive at Blue Spring.



Huautla cave explorers retreat to Camp-1 after a failed attempt to exit the flooding cave.



Cavers explore the Huautla system.



Cavers begin a 360 foot drop into the Huautla System.



A moment of wonder in the world's longest underground river in Puerto Rico.

"Oh, everybody's worried about the caves." I went down and peeked into the cave until my eyes got adjusted. It was strange. The bottom was covered with long blade ribbon grass all around the entrance. Inside the cave was just a black hole. Now, of course, there's white sand and clear rock, but back then it was just this black hole that you had to go through this grass to get into. I couldn't see very much, but for me it's the imagination. "Man how far does this go? Where is this water coming from? This is so cool!" I came back and started drawing pictures of what I saw and even trying to sketch the cavern just so that I could imagine myself being back there. It was a real strong hook for me. By the time my buddies and I were old enough to drive we had regular excursions going to the springs.

DT: What type of diving are you doing now? Nitrox and trimix?

Wes: Yes. I have always used whatever technology I needed to use to do the things I wanted to do. I have never gotten into technology just for the sake of technology. I'm not into having a bank of tanks and all the gauges and all the computer programs so I can bounce around the planet in high-tech gear. I am a project to project type of person. I love exploration and I consider what I do to be wholistic exploration. I'm not interested in seeing how far I can go. However, when I find a place that I like, I am into all aspects of it. Where does the water come from? What lives in here? How many water sources are there? Where does this little tunnel go? Where does this big tunnel go? Wholistic, looking at all aspects of it. When something takes me to the point where I need more technology, then I use it. I live a very technologically burdened life-style as it is. My real idea of fun is surfing. Bathing suits, surfboards

and water. That's what I do when I want to get away from it all.

Back in 1987, we did an 82 minute dive in Wakulla with max depths of 340 feet. At that time, penetrating over 4,000 feet at a depth of 320 feet had never been done. No one had ever been that far, at that depth, in an underwater cave. We wanted to see where the tunnel went and to map and film it. I've done a lot of that kind of diving with the main thrust being accomplishing goals like mapping or filming. That's what I'm really into.

DT: Did that project go with all the technology from Hamilton and his decompression models?

Wes: Yes. That was the first real project in which Hamilton crossed over to the sport diving community. Hamilton was into consulting for the big deep sea exploration projects, and he started to play with the idea of supporting the technical diving community. It wasn't even called technical diving back then. It was just groups of people doing meaningful explorations and projects in which Bill thought he could contribute. Parker Turner played a big role in getting Bill Stone and Bill Hamilton together. Hamilton agreed to fashion a set of tables that allowed us to really soar and cut the decompressions we were going to have to do. It made what we did in Wakulla a reality.

DT: What made you decide to get into underwater photography?

Wes: I started as a kid with 8mm and super 8 cameras. I shot stop action films and surfing films with my brother. My brother was real hard-core about getting the surfing images. I would help him and then I would edit the films. I really got into it. Then I bought a Nikonis II when they were new and got into still photography while diving the

springs in the early 70s. I have a strong number of images starting about 1972 or 1973. My interest in photography has always been from a documentary point of view. Now I'm a film maker full time. It's what I do for a living. I now produce, direct, write and shoot films for networks as well as what they call "acquisition work" with my partner Jeffrey Haupt.

DT: What type of photo and video equipment do you use?


Wes: I use whatever is the best for the job. It's just like dive technology. When it's time to do a deep exploration dive, I use the best that is available today. In motion picture film work it's the same thing. Technology changes rapidly, though. You buy a 30lb camera that costs more than your house and a year later that camera is obsolete. Unfortunately, I do have to buy these cameras. They are my work tools. I am continually upgrading. We're now shooting digital. We have several digital cameras in addition to our 16mm and 35mm film cameras.

DT: If I were a diver wanting to get into cave photography, what kind of equipment would you suggest?

Wes: I think the best formula for getting into underwater cave photography is the Nikonis V, with a 15mm underwater lens by Nikor, and a minimum of three strobes, one or two on the camera one or two off camera with slave syncs.

DT: What were a couple of your favorite projects?

Wes: The world's longest underground river is in Puerto Rico and it's called the Enchanted River. It is certainly one of the high points of my career. We explored almost 15 miles underground in a continuous under-

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ground river with 28 waterfalls. We discovered it by cave diving looking for a body. This was a pretty interesting way to begin an exploration project, I was flown to Puerto Rico in a jet to try and do a rescue. They dropped Henry Nicholson and I in a river canyon by helicopter to look for Tito Vasques underwater in a spring with low visibility on the Rio Manatee. We popped up 1200 feet back in this big room with this river running through it. That was the beginning of a series of expeditions where we pushed further into the cave.

DT: So you discovered it?

Wes: Yes, then after that the next big thing was Wakulla. We had two push teams and I got to shoot the film that was shown on the Best of National Geographic Explorer. There is also a one-hour version that was shown on PBS called Wakulla. This was not such a big deal to shoot, it just takes just an enormous commitment. These are big cameras. I remember having agonizingly sore muscles from hanging on to an aquazep with my legs. I had a light in one hand a camera in the other, scootering down the tunnel filming the push team 4,000 feet into Wakulla at a depth of 320 feet. You know what I mean If you've ever seen divers on aquazeps with their tanks attached under the scooter and they're hanging on with one hand and driving the scooter with the other, plus all their regulators and reels. I'm behind them or in front of them, geared the same way, only I'm driving my scooter with no hands taking pictures.

DT: How did you hold on to the zep?

WES: I built a system that kind of held me down in the back and I



Director/Cameraman Wes Skiles and Producer Jeffrey Haupt on the site of their latest Florida Film.

used my leg muscles and my calves and pulled the scooter just like you would climb a telephone pole. I just held onto it. It takes really wanting it. You really got to want it to get out there and get the footage.

DT: Do you have anything interesting going on now?

Wes: Jeffrey Haupt and I are working on a new episode of Bill Curtis's New Explorers featuring Eric Hutcheson and Mike Madden. I think this will be the finest underwater cave film ever made. We went to the Yucatan and stayed 20 days and shot 16mm film of virgin exploration dives. We discovered bone beds of Manatees and other sea creatures. We worked on connecting the system from eight kilometers inland all the way to the ocean. It's the most beautiful underwater cave I've ever seen. There are lots of caves that get me going but I've never dived a cave with so many different things to see and do.

DT: If you had a dream project, what would it be?

WES: The thing I want more than anything is a one atmosphere suit. I believe that the key to the secrets of what is to be discovered underwater are going to be discovered with one atmosphere suit exploration. I met

with Phil Nuytten personally and I'm currently training in a Newt Suit. I've learned how to take things apart, how to size the suit for myself, how to operate it, and getting in and using it. I really would like to mount a set of cameras on a Newt Suit and go flying underwater in the coolest places on the planet. That's what I'd like to do more than anything. I'd love to think that it's going to have no umbilical cord as well. The day that you don't need an

umbilical cord and you can just cruise in these suits is the day we will begin to do some really neat things.

DT: Do you have any advice for apprentice underwater photographers and videographers?

Wes: What I've discovered is that if you're a diver first, and you really understand diving well, and then you embrace photography or videography, I think you can do a jam up job of it. If you're a photographer or videographer first and you get into scuba diving to take your work to a new a dimension then it's more difficult. In my field I'm competing against thousands of film makers and camera men who learned to dive so they can shoot underwater. Or rather, they are competing against me. I have 22 years of cave diving experience. I'm able to think about the shot because I am not worried about whether or not I'm going to die. This is to my advantage and to the advantage of others who are comfortable underwater. That's what it's all about, being comfortable. Both disciplines, however, require a tremendous amount of experience. 🙌

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