

White Balance

How to achieve neutral whites and sharp colors

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Video and digital still cameras incorporate a valuable technology called white balance. It helps analyze the image as it is being taken and shifts any color cast so you achieve neutral whites.

Sounds great, huh? Well, it doesn't solve all your underwater color balance problems, but it sure can help. But, you really need to understand how it works. First step: read the instruction manual.

AUTO FUNCTION OR MANUAL ADJUSTMENTS On most cameras, the default is Auto. This means that the camera will analyze the overall color balance of a scene and use its own camera sense to determine the correct color balance. Generally, this works well, but if you know the light source in the scene, you might want to manually choose that setting to insure a correct color balance.

WHY WHITE BALANCE IN THE FIRST PLACE? So what good are white balance controls to an underwater photographer?

Well, you need to understand what color shift each setting corrects in order to see its purpose underwater. The sunlight setting is for normal color that needs no alteration, the flash setting corrects a slight blue cast, the cloudy modifies a stronger blue cast, the incandescent or tungsten corrects a red warm hue and the fluorescent corrects the tinge of green.

When you are shooting available-light pictures in tropical waters, cloudy is often a good setting to use. It brings some of the colors back and helps keep the photos from being overpowered by the shades of blue. The tungsten setting will not be used much underwater as red is the first color to be lost. The fluorescent setting is often handy in the dark deeper water or the greener waters of the Northwest and Northeast. It doesn't get rid of all the green hue, but does return some natural color. We have found this to be a handy setting when diving at Stingray City in Grand Cayman.

HAVING A GO When you have a handle on the basic settings, it's time to give the custom white balance setting a try. You simply point the camera at a white object, such as sand, rocks or coral, and take a reading. You can even keep a white write-on slate in your BC for just this purpose. Remember that your settings will change as you dive deeper.

On your next digital dive, give the white balance function a try. Use each of the different settings on the same subject to see how they react. Be prepared when you need to venture beyond Auto. 