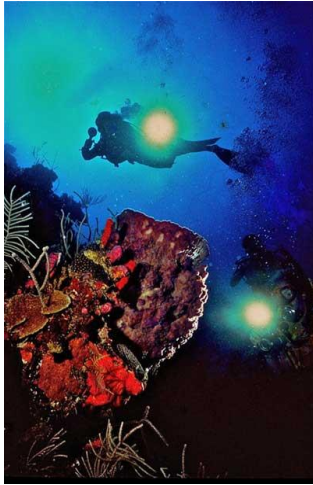


# Secrets of the Eleuthera Wall

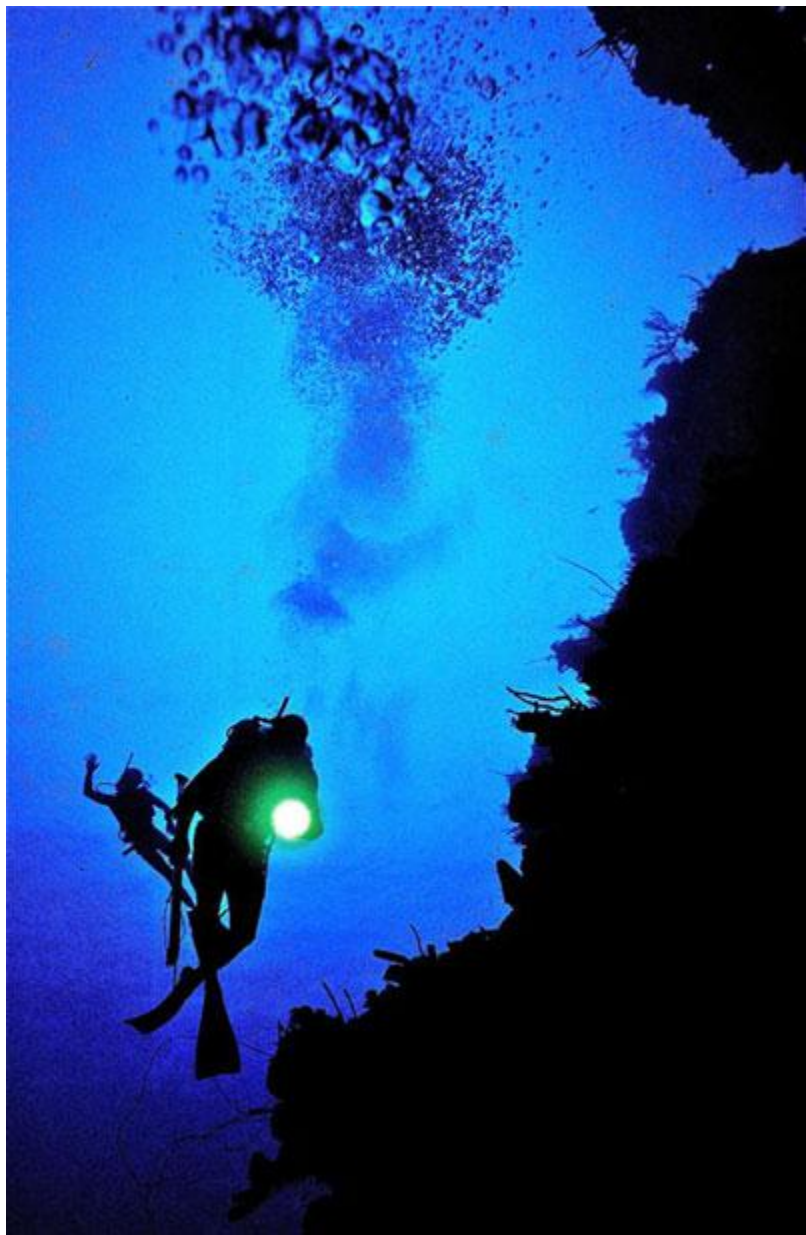


If Robert Frost had been an accomplished sport diver as well as America's poet laureate, he would never have written those famous lines, "something there is that doesn't love a wall." For unlike the New England stone fences that inspired that epithet, here is a wall that nature continues to build and nurture, rather than tear down.

Inner space reveals some of nature's most beautifully choreographed scenery. The most overwhelming of these seascapes is a vertical coral wall, recently discovered off the south end of [Eleuthera, in the Bahamas](#). This awesome drop off remains mostly unexplored, for much of the wall lies in unprotected waters, which requires almost no current to safely explore her depths. Minutes from the Cape Eleuthera Marina, this spectacular ledge is one of the most impressive diving areas in the Caribbean.

Gliding weightlessly in this three dimensional "Fairyland," you realize it is alive and growing. As our underwater lights illuminate shadowy recesses, a variety of marine life is revealed. Brilliant colors accentuate life in the ledges, caves and crevices: intricate patterns etched on huge corals invite close observation. As lacy corals reach out from the wall, filtering microscopic food from the sea, time seems to reflect only the present, yet predation and survival behavior are always in evidence. The excitement and the lure of wall diving are hard to explain. It is a unique diving experience. Like meditating, it puts one in perspective with nature and the universe - a great feeling of calmness results.

The Eleuthera Wall begins as shallow as 55 feet in some places and descends to depths of 2,000 feet into the Exuma Sound. Even



experienced divers seeing the drop-off for the first time display curious swimming antics as they begin to back-pedal, slowing or reversing their direction as if they fear falling off the ledge of the wall. Hovering above luxuriant coral gardens, the ocean bottom abruptly disappears, rewarding the adventurer with a breathtaking view into the clear, midnight blue abyss below.

Garfield McCartney, my good friend and diving partner for many years, who recently passed away, was the dive master at the [Cape Eleuthera Resort](#), a resort renowned as one of the finest in the out islands. The million dollar marina from which Garfield operated his dive shop and dive boats is one of the most popular ports of call in the Caribbean: and well it should be, for much of the superbly prepared seafood was caught by Garfield and served that evening in one of the most elegant restaurants in the out islands.



Garfield had earned his PADI Open Water Instructor Certification. Together we have explored blue holes, a subterranean lake, deep ocean caves and logged some of the most exciting night dives I have ever experienced. Night diving on the wall is the ultimate diving adventure. Night visitors to the vertical reef may find puffer fish, which when inflated, will hover in dark space like satellites in orbit: one might observe an

octopus displaying a kaleidoscope of color changes to confuse its enemy. Schools of squid, eyes glowing, reflecting the artificial light which attracted them: and lobsters much larger and less timid than their shallow, reef dwelling relatives, keeping their enemies at a safe distance.

Nature defies symmetry, especially underwater. I became aware of the simple fact, when, on a leisurely exploration of the vast crevasses that scar the rim of the wall, I discovered the most unusual coral outcropping I have ever seen. In the blue mist 175 feet away, a gigantic jewel encrusted necklace was pulled taught against the ledge as it trailed off into the fathomless depths of the Exuma Sound.

"What the hell is that?" One of our dive partners, Jim Fleming, scrawled on his slate.

I reacted with a quizzical expression. Then Garfield, Jim and I cautiously approached the weird formation as if to assure ourselves that it was not a nitrogen apparition. It wasn't, it wasn't Neptune's neckless either, although it would have made a fitting one.

Upon close, and I mean close, examination, we finally determined that our "natural marine phenomena" was a submerged cable that in the years since its intrusion had become an artificial reef for hundreds of diverse colonies of corals and sponges. They eventually enveloped the

tempered steel like multi-colored vegetables on an Arabian shish kebab. Along the cable



beneath us black coral erupted from a lacy network of gnarled and twisted aquatic fingers. Strobes flashed and cycled, ready for the next shot.

For a brief moment in this timeless world, man, driven by his curiosity, had witnessed another secret. Investigation later disclosed the reason for the cable's mysterious location. It was placed there by the Navy for sonar testing during World War II. After completing a dive off Cape Eleuthera last summer a group of divers were startled by the sudden appearance of a submarine surfacing nearby: another story to be added to the long list of adventures in these enchanting waters.

Although massive and eerie, the Eleuthera Wall supports a fragile ecosystem. Plate corals reach over ten feet in diameter and groupers weighing in excess of 100 pounds, can be found in caves or just lumbering effortlessly along the wall. In areas where spearfishing is permitted, these century-old giants are leery and scarce. Spearfishing is restricted by law in the Bahamas, allowing only Hawaiian slings to be used and only while free-diving.

The natural enemies of living coral are perpetually devouring living coral tissue. Some of these enemies include crustaceans, (copepods, curipedes, crabs), annelid worms, gastropod mollusks and fish. Defensively, coral feeding mechanisms also demonstrate the animal's efficient predation system. Extending its polyps, usually at night, the feeding activity begins. Equipped with small, spring-loaded cells called nematocysts, the polyps snare prey with whip-like tentacles trapping small organisms.



Another population of strange animals brilliantly decorates the Eleuthera Wall in a gallery of colors. Sponges, (Phylum porefera), are unique in the animal kingdom. This lowest form of multi-celled animal has been in existence since the Paleozoic era. Fossil remains of the sponge, (skeletons), are the only evidence of the earliest sponges. In prehistoric time, sponges were so abundant that the spicule remains formed some of the flint beds. Primitive men later used the flint to make fire.

Little is known about the age of sponges. Some of the larger specimens in deeper waters may have lived for hundreds of years, while others may live for a year or less. Sponges have been brought up from depths as great as 8,000 meters (26,000 feet).

Along the Eleuthera Wall giant sponges are nourished by the organic nutrients in the water. Food, including algae, bacteria and organic detritus, enters through microscopic pores, (porocytes) is passed through the interior cavities of the sponge. Tiny inhabitants occupy the pore spaces among the sponge fibers, living out their life cycle in the liquid mass within the

sponge. Polychaetes, copepods, shrimp and numerous other small organisms reside in the complex canal system within its body walls. The same current which brings food and oxygen to the cells, also carries the sperm of one sponge to the egg of another. This cross-fertilization is the most common method of fertilization in the animal kingdom.



Black coral grows on the Eleuthera Wall at depths starting at 80 feet. It is usually found deep in the tropical oceans of the world, and few people have seen black coral in its natural state. The rarity and relatively inaccessibility tend to enhance its value: black coral commands a high price when polished and made into jewelry. Black coral trees reaching lengths of more than eight feet have been found at depths below 250 feet along the wall. In its natural habitat, black coral bears little resemblance to the polished finished product, looking more like a dead tree with a light mossy covering usually grey or rust colored.

The black coral tree is actually a colony of living animals. It is built up in layers, and only the top layer comes from plankton. Black coral (Alcenarian) is the closest relative to sea fans and sea whips. Not classified like true coral, it is a hard wood. Highly polished, black coral has the deep luster of ebony and inky blackness of onyx. It is know as "King's coral" in India: in ancient times it had been used to make scepters.

Black coral may be counted among the ocean's treasures. New laws forbid the taking of coral in many areas, resulting in a black market operation. In Eleuthera and throughout the Caribbean, strict enforcement by resort owners and divemasters insures that black coral and countless other beautiful corals will remain in the sea to be enjoyed by divers around the world.



The coral wall is one of the most colorful communities in existence. Although the deeper areas may never be seen by sport divers, a special environment will be preserved for exploration, when technology and increased knowledge permit deeper and longer visits into the sea.

An island of mystical heritage; a free land or rural, agrarian life, Eleuthera provides a life of dignity for the Bahamian men and women who harvest the land and the sea - and a unique atmosphere for visiting sport divers.

The Eleuthera Wall was discovered and named by John Walsh, Bob Wallace and Garfield McCartney.

Story and Photography by Bob Wallace, M.Sc.