Snorkeling and Free Diving Guidance

1. Introduction

UMaine supports and encourages the use and enjoyment of the marine and aquatic environment and requires guidelines be followed to promote individual safety. Snorkeling and free diving require skills and awareness specific to these activities to promote safety.

The following guidelines are to be observed by all individuals engaged in official UMaine activities and/or engaged in recreational activities at UMaine facilities or sponsored by UMaine.

2. General Considerations for Snorkeling and Free Diving

As with any activity, individuals should exercise good judgment and err on the side of caution in questionable circumstances.

a. Personal Fitness/ Experience

Individuals are encouraged to objectively evaluate their level of personal fitness, watermanship, and appropriate experience prior to engaging in any in-water activity. Consultation with a medical provider may be necessary to understand personal fitness in the context of snorkeling and free diving.

b. No Lifeguard on Duty

There is no lifeguard on duty at many/most outdoor, shorefront locations. Individuals who require or prefer supervision by a qualified lifeguard are encouraged to seek locations that have supervision or lifeguards available.

Individuals participating in water-related activities are encouraged to possess or seek training in appropriate water rescue and self-rescue skills.

c. Personal Floatation Devices

All individuals participating in water-related activities should consider wearing wear an appropriate, U.S. Coast Guard approved, Personal Floatation Device (PFD) as activities allow. PFDs are required to be worn while onboard any UMaine vessels and onboard any vessel used for official UMaine activities, including canoes and kayaks.

d. Environmental Conditions

Individuals are encouraged to monitor local weather forecasts and be aware of changing conditions prior to engaging in, and during any outdoor activities including snorkeling and free diving.

> ***Weather -*** Air temperature, winds, precipitation, visibility, and storm activity are all factors to be considered. Marine/aquatic weather conditions can vary greatly from mainland conditions and changes often occur rapidly. Weather reporting for marine environment is often different than general weather reporting.

Water **-** Water temperature, waves, tides, and currents are all factors to be considered. Water conditions also often change rapidly.

Even in relatively warm water, exposure protection in the form of a wetsuit or drysuit is recommended for all in-water activities.

e. Vessel Traffic

Many waterways are used by a variety of commercial and recreational boating traffic. Individuals are encouraged to plan activities to provide maximum distance from and avoidance of local boat traffic.

High contrast apparel, signaling devices, and/or shorefront spotters are recommended to provide maximum visibility for individuals in the water.

f. Buddy System

Use of the buddy system is encouraged for all in-water activities (i.e., two or more comparably skilled individuals in constant communication).

g. Float Plan/ Shore Contact

Individuals participating in water related activities should consider completing and sharing a Float Plan describing at minimum their mode of operation, destination, activity, and estimated time of return. A designated contact person should be informed of the float plan and be capable of notifying the appropriate authorities in the event the party does not return.

Float plans are required for all UMaine vessel operations, including canoes and kayaks.

3. Emergencies

A general emergency plan should be established for all in-water activities, with specific information for each location. In general, if an emergency occurs, notify others in the area and call 911. (Verify emergency reporting process if snorkeling or free diving in other countries.)

Maintain visual contact with the individual(s) in distress and, if possible, provide them with adequate flotation or other appropriate means of assistance. Do not attempt an in-water or vessel rescue if you are not trained to do so.

4. Snorkeling vs. Free Diving

Snorkeling and free diving are two very different activities even though they seem similar to members of the public engaged in recreation. However, there are significant differences between snorkeling and free diving and their inherent hazards. For the purposes of UMaine sponsored activities, UMaine establishes the following distinctions:

Snorkeling- swimming on the surface of the water, using any combination of mask, snorkel, and/or fins, without any breath-holding or submersion.

Free diving- swimming on or under the surface of the water, using any combination of mask, snorkel, and/or fins, with occasional or repeated breath-holding excursions to any depth.

Hookah Diving- allows a diver to breathe compressed air without the use of traditional scuba equipment. Also called Hookah Snorkeling, Supplied-Air Snorkeling (SAS), or Surface-Air Supplied Snorkeling (SASS), these systems are incorrectly perceived to be no different than snorkeling. In fact, hookah systems subject users to the same physical and physiological effects and hazards of scuba diving.

Hookah or compressed air diving is considered scuba diving at UMaine. Individuals who wish to use hookah systems in any UMaine activity must be trained scuba divers. Contact the UMaine Diving Operations Manager for further information and requirements.

5. UMaine Snorkeling Guidelines

a. When snorkeling for UMaine academic or work-related activities, or at UMaine facilities or sponsored activities:
b. Be familiar with and follow these guidelines.
c. Objectively evaluate your level of personal fitness, swimming/snorkeling ability, and experience prior to entering the water.
d. Individuals who require or prefer supervision by a qualified lifeguard are encouraged to find locations where lifeguards are available.
e. Use a buddy system.
f. Obtain training in appropriate rescue and self-rescue skills.
g. Use personal floatation devices or snorkeling vests.
h. Wear appropriate exposure protection (wetsuit or drysuit).
i. Monitor local weather forecasts and be aware of changing weather and water conditions.
j. Be aware of and monitor vessel traffic.
k. Use high contrast apparel, signaling devices, and shorefront spotters to provide maximum visibility for swimmers in the water.
l. Notify appropriate personnel prior to engaging in activities near working waterfronts.
m. File a Float Plan or tell someone your plans.
n. In general, swim/snorkel during daylight hours only.
o. Carry a cutting device or similar tool in case of entanglement when snorkeling.
p. If free diving is to be conducted in conjunction with snorkeling, follow the new guidelines in Sec. 6.

6. Free Diving Guidelines

Free diving or breath-hold diving is a hazardous activity which can result in serious injury or death. Repetitive free diving and/or excessive hyperventilation can result in a condition known as "shallow-water blackout" or "free diver blackout."

Blackout occurs when body oxygen levels become insufficient to maintain consciousness. As a breath-hold diver ascends and oxygen levels drop, they may become unconscious. If support personnel are not properly trained and equipped to handle the situation, the diver will likely die by drowning.

When free diving for UMaine academic or work-related activities, or at UMaine facilities:

a. Be familiar with and follow these guidelines.
b. Objectively evaluate your level personal fitness, swimming/diving ability, and experience prior to entering the water.
c. Individuals who require or prefer supervision by a qualified lifeguard are encouraged to find locations where lifeguards are available.
d. Obtain appropriate training in free diving techniques/skills.
e. Use the buddy system (1 up, 1 down).
f. Avoid free diving when water conditions prohibit constant visual contact between divers.
g. Monitor local weather forecasts and be aware of changing weather and water conditions.
h. Be aware of and monitor vessel traffic.
i. Be familiar with and follow appropriate and safe pre-dive breathing procedures. Avoid excessive hyperventilation.
j. Limit free diving tasks/activities to observation only, avoid excessive work, tasks or equipment loading. Consider using self-contained breathing apparatus (SCUBA) (if properly trained and authorized) when additional work, tasks, or equipment are needed.
k. Take appropriate intervals for rest between dives.
l. When using weights, divers should be weighted such that they are slightly positively buoyant from the surface to 30 feet below surface and can achieve positive buoyancy at any time by dropping their weights.
m. Notify appropriate personnel prior to engaging in activities near working waterfronts.
n. File a Float Plan with a competent shore-based contact person.
o. In general, free dive during daylight hours only.
p. Each free diver should carry a cutting device or similar tool in case of entanglement.
q. Do not free dive after scuba or hookah diving activities.

References

- Aquatics Safety Research Group- http://www.aquaticsafetygroup.com/ShallowWaterBlackout.html
- Butler, FB. Breath-hold Diving: A proposed 60-second rule. Alert Diver, Sep./Oct. 2004; 34-40
- Dive Wise- www.divewise.org
- Pollack, NW. Breath-hold Diving: Expanding our aquatic range. Alert Diver, Sep./Oct. 2008; 52-55.
- University of Maine Scientific Diving Program http://umaine.edu/scientificdiving/
- University of Maine Watercraft