



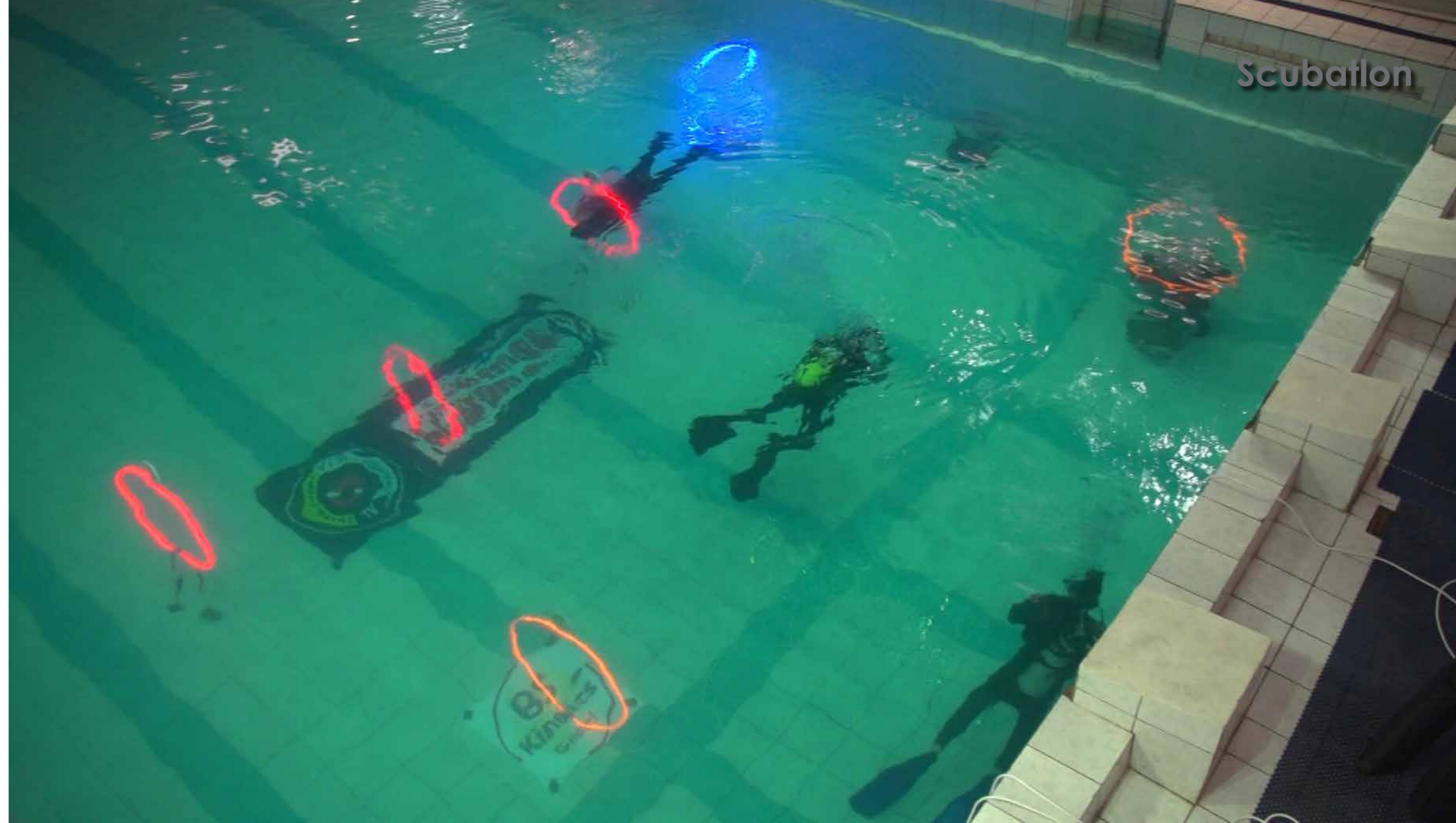
# Scubathlon

*Environmental Protection as a Sport*

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Over the last half century, scuba diving—which was, in its earlier days, reserved for the elite, brave and courageous—has become a mainstream sport for the masses. On the one hand, this is very good. Millions of people get to see with their own eyes how diverse and exciting the underwater world is. On the other hand, diving causes serious damage to coral reefs, which are rich in biodiversity, but extremely vulnerable to human impact. In a response to the diving community's demand for more protection of the reefs and the underwater realm, a group of divers came up with the idea of Scubatlon—a tournament in traditional recreational diving with a conservation bent.



Scubatlon



Author with science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke

## How it all started

"We are not making enough money from our dive center, but we enjoy it immensely," said science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke sitting in his wheelchair. The rustling of palm trees and the ocean waves could be heard just outside. At his home in Colombo, Sri Lanka, I met with Clarke while shooting a documentary about his work in science fiction.

Just prior to that, we had been talking for a long time about the future of humankind and civilization on Earth. But after hearing his words about diving, I saw in front of me not just the great master of science fiction,

but a quite down-to-earth person.

The problems of my dive center in Moscow, which at that moment had existed for about 15 years, were very much the same as what Clarke was describing. The flow of tourists was growing steadily, but people's attitudes towards the ocean were changing at a much slower pace than the disappearance of coral reefs. The ocean is huge, but as it turns out, the places that are interesting and accessible to divers are not so numerous. Over the last couple of decades, the reefs in the Red Sea, for example, have been practically trampled down.

## The project

The idea of Scubatlon was not to invent artificial tournaments, but to introduce elements of competition into traditional recreational diving. This is actually how the name for the event was created, which consisting of two words: scuba, and a variant of the Ancient Greek word *athlon*, *áthion* or *atlon*, meaning *competition* or *contest*. It was my opinion that the most euphonic combination of these terms was Scubatlon.

Little had to be devised for the project itself. It was born organically, combining demand and opportunities to meet

that demand. It was a response to the demand for nature protection, which had developed in the diving community. When creating my first films about the underwater world, I wanted to include an epigraph: "Look and never dive." However, one cannot achieve much with bans. We had to look for more realistic solutions. The start of the Scubatlon project helped me to get a load off my mind. The new slogan was "Environmental Protection as a Sport." Rather than making up competitions for divers, we created a sports discipline to help develop safe diving.





THIS PAGE: Learning proper buoyancy skills in order to protect coral reefs is a key motivation and goal driving the development of the Scubatlon competition; The glowing obstacle course rings were tested on sharks first (bottom right), which passed with flying colors, and then on beginner level divers, who ended up damaging the expensive rings. So, the glowing rings were then used only with advanced divers, and metal rings were used with beginners.

## Scubatlon

dred million years ago, there was one, but now, it does not exist. Or, rather, it's still there, but deep underground. Well, go and try to explain this to people who want to dive right now. A swimming pool, in its traditional form, is a very poor alternative to the sea. Staring at the patterns on the swimming pool walls is not as exciting as communication with live creatures in nature. Certainly, dive club events can be organized with some artificial activities in the swimming pool, but this is not very entertaining.

Having realized these problems, we tried to resolve them. One of the tasks was to teach divers good manners, and in such a way that the process was interesting to



### Returning students

The first Scubatlon contest was held by our dive club in 2005, the same year the Scubatlon Association was created. I was the Association President. By that time, our dive club had existed for more than 20 years already. Over this period of time, we faced the issue of some of our students, who had completed the training and traveled to the sea, returning to us with a request to teach them to "dive correctly". We all knew the problems that recently-certified open water divers caused on the coral reefs. They were the ones who damaged the reef most during their first dives.

And the remarkable thing was that many of these students came back to our training, having felt the responsibility for the reef and its inhabitants. The situation with these divers was quite clear. If

there was a will, there was a way to teach them.

The second category of open water divers believed that they could dive well, proudly displayed their certificates and did not want to learn how to dive in a nice fashion. Or, rather, the thought just did not cross their minds.

### Buoyancy is key

There are a lot of courses available at dive centers to help improve and work on buoyancy. The problem was that they were a trifle boring. The course results were not immediately visible—maybe, that was why they were not very popular. With Scubatlon, the situation was precisely the opposite. Not only did you acquire buoyancy skills while preparing for the con-



tests, but you were also improving them all the time.

### Location

The second problem was a geographical one. Nowadays, there is no sea in Moscow. Two hun-





participants and the result was evident. By combining training and games, Scubatlon became an obvious response to the demand for more protection of the reefs. It was a game with a practical result. In scuba diving courses, we taught people to dive nicely, to manage air consumption and not to brush against anything when diving. The contests were aimed at developing these skills.

Traditionally, the contests are held at night. That is why the name of our event is Scubatlon Night. This is a so-called tribute to tradition.

## Combining traditions

In addition to an underground sea, Moscow has other remarkable phenomena. For example, there is a custom here to celebrate the Old New Year on the nights of the 13th and the 14th of January. It is hard to understand at the first glance, but there is a logical explanation to it. The church in Russia lives by the Julian calendar; it is called the Orthodox Church for a reason. The state, however, follows the Gregorian calendar.

So, everybody is happy about an



extra holiday, and divers in Russia found a very good application for it. Many Russian dive centers have a tradition of seeing the Old New Year in underwater. Considering the not-so-long history of scuba diving, this event has already turned into a "beautiful old custom."

Due to its age, our dive club was one of the founders of the Old New Year tradition. The event went as follows. At ten o'clock in the evening, the pool closed for the visitors and a variety of contests and relay races started underwater. We saw that all we had to do was just replace these activities with our Scubatlon competitions.

But traditions are strong. The culmination of the celebration had been seeing the Old New Year in underwater with champagne.

This moment threatened to divide the competition into two unequal parts. But the issue was resolved by the competition itself. In the heat of action, nobody noticed the start of the Old New Year.

## Requirements and conditions

In the beginning, there were no limits. Divers holding beginning level certificates of any generally-accepted diver training system were admitted to the starting level competitions. The requirements of the competition were most-closely related to "combat" restrictions. There was a minimum of "academic" restrictions.

The participants swam the obstacle course with the equipment they used for open water diving. One could argue,



The challenge tests divers' management of air consumption and buoyancy skills.



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Scubation



Obstacle courses vary with increasing levels of difficulty

which is better: BCD or wing? Lately, the argument also includes sidemount. Each diver selects what he or she considers better. Everybody must comply with the following principles: personal safety, convenience and no dam-

the 11.3-liter aluminum tank, as its dimensions were close enough to the 12 liter steel tank.

**Response & improvements**  
Of course, we were very nervous before the first competition. We

age to the environment. There was no need to buy special equipment for the contest. All gear and special options used for improving your streamlining and buoyance on the competition track would come in handy during the recreational diving obstacle course.

Any configuration was allowed, including wetsuits or drysuits. The mandatory conditions included an octopus, an analogue pressure gauge on a console, and tank capacity no less than 12 liters. The exception was

could not predict the response of divers accustomed to open water. There were some doubters, who spoke out quite harshly against our initiative. But critics will be critics, it is always easier to criticize.

As it turned out, our fears were unfounded. The first competition was a great success. But with the first admirers of the event appeared the first problems. Suddenly, we discovered that all the participants were different in height and constitution. We managed to resolve this problem by placing the obstacles in the obstacle course at an angle to each other and at different heights. It then became possible to pass the track only by using a helicopter turn and by altering buoyancy.

We also had to simplify the track a little. For example, the obstacle consisting of two rings lying horizontally, one over the other, turned out to be too complicated for divers who were at the beginner





In order to improve pass-through capacity, two parallel obstacle courses were instituted and an assistant judge was added to repositioned rings bumped by participants.

## Scubatlon

as much as a spaceship. The process turned out to be labor-intensive and expensive.

The first testers of the glowing rings were sharks. No issues with them. But it did not go so well with actual divers.

It turned out that the glowing rings were quite vulnerable to some of these "fin-footed mammals." Since we admitted everyone in our contests, not looking at the participants' skill level, the first obstacle course of rings was destroyed.

The problem was resolved by dividing the participants into groups. The contests with an obstacle course of metal rings were open to everyone holding a diver certificate. The glowing ring obstacle course was limited to only those who has passed the Scubatlon Scuba Master special training course.

### Scubatlon Scuba Master

In addition to buoyancy training, this course also prepared students for the

contest. Following the already established syllabus, we included elements of the games in the training. Each lesson ended with working on how to pass one of the obstacles of the Scubatlon obstacle course.

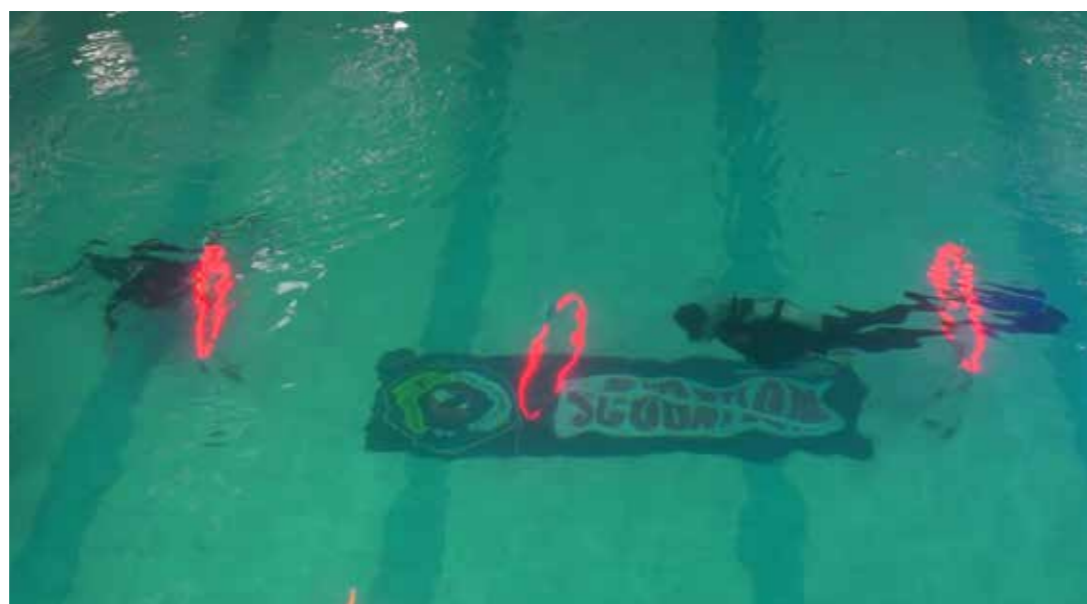
This was a very important moment for students, as they could see the results immediately. The students then became more motivated to take part in the contest and compare their skills with those of others. One can make hundreds of dives and collect a stack of plastic cards, but the objective indicator of the skill to dive expertly and safely for the environment is easily tested by the Scubatlon obstacle course, where all the participants are on equal footing.

I would like to note that the Scubatlon Association, as a matter of principle, does not conduct beginner level diving training, as this process is already well organized. Our training is for certified divers. We accept the certificate of any of gener-

level. So, we left only one ring. However, there were expert divers who managed to pass the whole line of obstacles with twin tanks.

The track time of each participant was fixed. The more participants, the more time it took. The competition became a night-long event. In order to improve the pass-through capacity, we made two parallel obstacle courses. This solved one problem and added another. Now we had two participants diving at the same time, so we had to add a judge and an assistant judge who could restore the course after negligent divers disrupted obstacles.

Our varied depth pool, which had a 10x12m deep section, started to look like a marine mammal pen. In addition to passing the obstacle course, its restoration and result assessment, divers all also had to stay clear from each other. The underwater scene became lively and much more fun.



### Special effects

There was some gloom in the underwater landscape, which was due to the aluminum rings and standard lighting of the swimming pool. We wanted to make the action in the pool look more like a stage show, so we got the idea of using glowing rings.

At first, the task was easy. But the rings had to be light, strong, have positive buoyancy in fresh water, keep their shape at the depth without deforming, and on top of it all, they had to glow and not cost





ally-accepted training system, beginning with Open Water Diver or One-Star Diver level, or similar certifications.

## Expansion & development

A big surprise was that the contest, which started as an internal club entertainment event, quickly developed into something bigger. The idea was taken up by other dive clubs. They started holding their own internal contests and regular training sessions. Step by step, the competitions between dive clubs developed into the Scubatlon Cup. Now various dive clubs send their teams to the Scubatlon Cup stages.

A "side effect" of all these training sessions and contests is a continuous improvement in divers' buoyancy skills. As of today, there are now several levels of difficulty in the obstacle courses designed for different levels of participants.

Since 2015, the tournament is held in five stages over a year. At each stage, there is a winner. The results of the five stages define the Cup finalists. The competitions are held as individual and team all-around events. The Cup itself is a perpetual trophy and has been passed to winning dive clubs since 2017.

Diving equipment manufacturers have also gotten caught up in the idea. Winners now receive awards at the Cup stages and at the regular contests. At the Cup stages, the awards are presented by TUSA. The Cup finalists get the Aqua Lung awards, and the winner receives a regulator from LEGEND.

These days, Scubatlon steps far beyond

With the surprising popularity of the contest, it has expanded to an international tournament, with contests taking place in the Mediterranean and Red Seas.

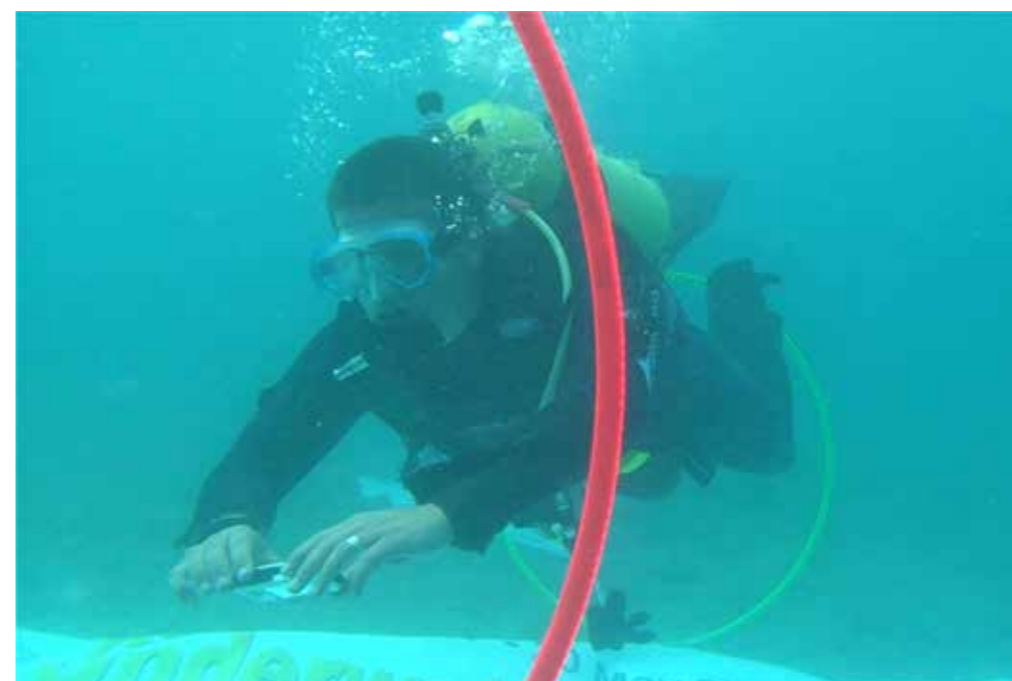
Moscow's city limits. In Russia, the contests are also held in the Urals and in the Far East.

## Online training & workshops

To prepare instructors and judges, we use online training in addition to workshops. The online training



# Scubatlon



## Open water contests

Naturally, from the very first days of development, we were tempted to hold the contest in open water. A pool is the least-evil solution, but we had to try. First, we set up the glowing obstacle course in Hurghada. We held a contest at the Dahab lighthouse.

The main problem with contests in open water is the currents. In Hurghada, we found a suitable place—a closed space without currents, with depths of 6 to 7m. We set up the obstacle course... and the first one to get in there was a sea turtle. Looks like animals like the idea too!

We also organized the contests in the Mediterranean Sea in Turkey. Now, having gained some experience, we are preparing to hold the Scubatlon Cup competitions in open water. We hope, this movement will continue to expand, and we look forward to meeting you at the competitions. ■

For more information, visit: [scubatlon.com/en/](http://scubatlon.com/en/)

experience proved to be very useful for international certification. A Scubatlon Scuba Master instructor has a right to teach a relevant course and judge the contests. A judge, respectively, is authorized to assist the instructor when training and to judge the contests.

To certify for a Scubatlon instructor, one needs to have an instruc-

tor certificate from one of the generally-accepted dive training systems. Respectively, a judge should be certified as a Dive-master, Three-Star Diver, or similar certification at the corresponding skill level. Since the project is still developing, we offer some free instructor and judge certificates for new regions and countries.

