

# The NWild Side:

## Free-divers Hunt Fish In Frigid Waters



NEAH BAY, Wash.—They're the meat-eating mer-men of the Northwest, anglers packing heat and holding their breaths as they hunt rockfish and lingcod in the frigid depths of Washington's inshore saltwater ledges and kelp beds.

Dave Forcucci and a dozen others are free-divers, a sport involving specialized wet suits and fins, and deep-water descents without scuba gear. "Some do it for sport or photography, and there's a bunch of us who like to go out and shoot fish for dinner," says Forcucci.

**Club name** Washington Freedive and Spearfishing Association, or Bottom Sounders for short. Members include emergency-room doctors, architects, a magician/Dracula actor and a Boeing blacksmith, says Forcucci, who is a civilian Coast Guard employee.

**The happy spearfishing grounds** The group enjoys heading out to the fish- and wreck-rich waters off Neah Bay, where black rockfish are the staple, and inside Puget Sound, where they hunt lingcod, cabezon and greenling.

**I'm gonna hold my breath!** Without bulky scuba gear, free-divers are only underwater 30 seconds to a minute, Forcucci says. "You don't have a lot of time to line up a shot. Everything's moving. It's like if you came up on a deer. With rockfish, I usually put my gun out in front of me, pick one out of the school, line it up and shoot – it's pretty quick."

**Dive!** "Average depth while spearfishing is probably 30 feet."

**Short shot** Forcucci's spear gun is most effective inside 10 feet.

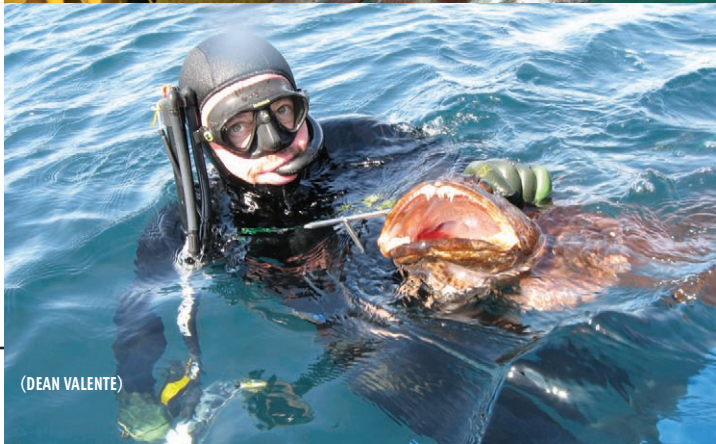
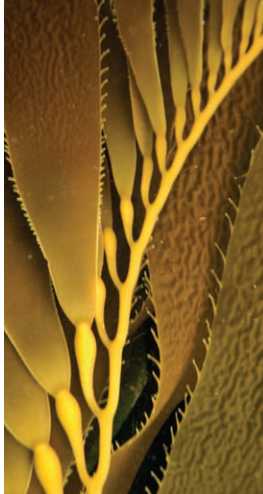
**Water conditions** Clarity at Neah Bay can be "pretty good," 15 to 25 feet, but it works both ways. "When it's clear, the fish can see you," Forcucci says. His site, [underseaimages.com/blog](http://underseaimages.com/blog), shows that even in late summer, water temperatures there may not reach the 50-degree mark.

**Dangers** Shallow-water blackout, a loss of consciousness that occurs just before a diver surfaces. Always go with a buddy.

**In the blood** Though not a hard-core spearfisherman, it's something Forcucci's done for a long time. "When I was 12, I was spearing flounder – that's 35 years ago." He's also the father of two young kids, err, snorkelers. "It's in the blood ... it's genetic."

**We're gonna need a bigger spear gun** For 2009, Forcucci is training to dive deeper and longer. "For me, my thing is halibut," he says; he'll need to descend to sandy bottoms in 40 to 80 feet of water for the flatsiders. "Some of us are interested in going offshore for the tuna – 50 miles out, jump in," Forcucci adds. "That would be cool." – **Andy Walgamott**

(ALL DAVE FORCUCCI EXCEPT AS NOTED)



(DEAN VALENTE)