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## Dive through Sharks to a Volcano 100 Feet Down? Sure, Watch This!

EXTREMELY BC: I'd rather try it without oxygen, said Deirdre Leowinata.



Ian Gill, Today | TheTye.ca

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When Deirdre Leowinata reached the peak of one of Canada's highest mountains last month, one of her first thoughts was to go higher.

That's not uncommon among summiteers, but in her case it was less an urge for greater glory than a necessity — because Leowinata had *descended* to the top of Mount Bowie, and safety was at sea level, about 100 feet above.

Leowinata, 29, made the dive without oxygen, or rather with one great gulp of oxygen that propelled her free dive in some of the most treacherous waters on the planet.

The Bowie Seamount, or S̱Ga̱an Ḵingẖlas as it is known in the Haida Indigenous language, is a large submarine volcano about 180 kilometres off the west coast of Haida Gwaii, an island archipelago which itself is considered one of the remotest and weather beset places in Canada.

At about 10,000 feet above the seabed, Bowie is not the biggest seamount in Canada — that's said to be the Explorer Seamount off the coast of Vancouver Island — but it is considered one of the most biologically rich submarine volcanoes on Earth.

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“There were *so* many fish,” Leowinata said in an interview.

Operating from a catamaran, *Habitat* — flagship of a British Columbia conservation organization, Pacific Wild, skippered by renowned wildlife photographer Ian McAllister — Leowinata said she and *Habitat*’s small crew took a chance on a rare weather window and left Haida Gwaii looking for the seamount. “We lucked out hardcore with the weather.”

When they got near the mount, one challenge was pinpointing its summit. *Habitat*’s depth sounder had trouble penetrating the sheer number of fish to find the reef, but eventually they set a buoy on what appeared to be a peak at the 90-foot mark below the surface. Of course, that level changed continuously with uplifting swells and changing tides. What’s more, *Habitat* couldn’t anchor.

On what the crew agreed was the last day they could risk being untethered and so forgivingly weathered, McAllister made a scuba dive on the mount, and Leowinata did some warm-up free dives, one to 65 feet below the surface.



‘I never dove with sharks before,’ says Leowinata. ‘They were like puppies, curious. I had to push them away from the camera.’ Photo courtesy of Pacific Wild.

She was somewhat unnerved by the fact that the waters were brimming with sharks. “I never dove with sharks before. I saw a blue shark, and I freaked out. ‘There’s a

shark!’ Then four more. Every time I put my head in the water there were more sharks.” She was photographing them, and “they were like puppies, curious. I had to push them away from the camera.”

Her warm-ups put her in a meditative state, her favourite part of the whole experience. “Breathing up, all the toxins coming out of you, breathing *light!*” She felt good, so she went again.

“I knew I could hit the 75-foot mark, but I didn’t know if I could hit 90.”

On her final dive, she followed McAllister’s bubbles.

McAllister: “I went down to one pinnacle, about 95 feet, and Deirdre had been up on the surface freediving with the blue sharks, and I got down to the pinnacle top, getting my gear sorted out, lights turned on and that kind of thing, and I looked beside me and thought it was another blue shark or something, and through all the fish comes Deirdre, you know freediving — no scuba, no assisted air or anything, down there just playing with the rockfish. Pretty amazing.”

Leowinata: “I was honestly down for a little more than a minute. Below the layer of sharks is this blue water that I had never experienced before. Really deep, deep blue. It’s really surprising how much light there is down there.”

In the end, Leowinata hit 94 feet.

“The trippiest thing is that there *is* land underneath you. It is so surreal, like Atlantis rising up from the depths. I touched the mountain, like Everest.”

She blushes at the analogy, but fair enough. McAllister says only about a dozen divers have ever been on the reef, in three previous expeditions, and Leowinata is pretty sure she’s the first to free dive it. Back in her scuba gear, she dove with McAllister to 123 feet, the farthest she’s ever descended.



VIDEO: Pacific Wild co-founder Ian McAllister marvels at the stamina of his free diving colleague Deirdre Leowinata, and the rich abundance of sea life inhabiting the 'ocean oasis' SGaan K̓inghlas.

In addition to sharks, they saw rockfish and prowlfish and wolf eels. The mount was lined with zoanthsids, anemones and various sea stars, including big sunflower stars.

“It’s a rare experience to dive on this coast and find a place that immediately leaves you breathless because of the abundance and diversity of life that it supports,” McAllister said. In over 30 years of diving on Canada’s Pacific coast, he’s never seen such a “marine powerhouse — a globally significant biological hotspot of marine diversity.”

“It’s definitely a flagship MPA (marine protected area),” Leowinata said.

The Haida and Canadian nations in fact declared it as such in 2008, the Canadian government describing it as an “ocean oasis,” which is pretty lyrical for a government press release, but no match for the Haida, for whom SGaan K̓inghlas means Supernatural One Looking Outward.



much of what we document in the marine environment these days feels like a lament for what we have lost,' says McAllister. 'Places like Bowie should be protected at all costs.' Photo of rockfish inhabiting SGaan K̓inghlas courtesy of Pacific Wild.

For conservationists and others concerned about the rampant depletion of global fisheries, places like SGaan K̓inghlas are proof positive that MPAs work.

“Fish (including major commercial species) require new refuges — marine reserves — providing shelter for a wide variety of species, which will then be protected from collapse,” writes eminent Canadian marine biologist Daniel Pauly in his recent book, *Vanishing Fish*.

The Bowie Seamount is just such a refuge, but its isolation is both an asset and a curse.

“So much of what we document in the marine environment these days feels like a lament for what we have lost, so places like Bowie should be protected at all costs. The question for Canada and the Haida Nation is how to actually enforce and monitor protection of a place so remote,” McAllister said.

More than a decade after the MPA was announced, the two governments have now completed a [management plan](#) for SGaan K̓inghlas-Bowie Seamount. It is beyond

important that their collaborative plan succeeds in conserving the seamount from threats like increased shipping traffic, oil spills and illegal fishing, McAllister says. The management plan cites four priorities: cooperative governance, education and outreach, research to support conservation initiatives, and monitoring. Monitoring is key to enforcement. Don't put it past Leowinata to drop by again one summer to see how they're doing.

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