



URBAN LIVING

Eric Blackmon, president of the Windy City Seals Scuba Diving Club of Chicago, explores wreckage in the waters of Nassau, Bahamas.

The Wonderful World of Black Scuba Divers, Surfers & Skiers

**Adventurous African Americans Break From
"Routine Recreation"**

By George Willis

They still get curious looks and even some stares, especially when they arrive in large groups ready to enjoy outdoor sports that many African Americans still consider taboo.

But these days black folks in growing numbers are surfing ocean waves, diving to the deepest depths of the sea, and hitting the ski slopes seeking thrills and enjoying outdoor sports normally not associated with people of color.

"It's pretty exciting the things that are going on with black folks that are coming out of the traditional," said Tony Corley, founder of the Black Surfing Association. "It's really pretty special."

Black surfers are seldom seen in vacation commercials, but they are becoming increasingly visible on the shorelines across the globe. The Black Surfing Association was founded in 1975 to help coordinate and educate those of African ancestry who have an interest in wave-riding. It has about 200 members worldwide.

"When you're surfing you can leave all your worldly concerns behind," Corley said. "You're out there where the sky and the sea and the ocean come together; the bigger the wave, the bigger the thrill."

Corley, 58, started surfing in 1962 when he rented a surf board and figured he'd give the sport a try. "I was a total failure at it," he recalled. "I got hit in the head and drank half the water in the ocean. I was exhausted and shivering, but thought, 'This is a lot of fun. I think I'm going to do it again,' and I've done it ever since."

His next quest was finding someone like him to surf with. That led him to writing a letter in 1974 that was published in *Surfer Magazine*, searching for other black surfers who might want to form an organization. The second response he received was a racially motivated threat: "If you start a black spook club there's going to be trouble." Conley still has that letter.

Soon more supportive letters were coming from all over the country, including from Delaware, Georgia, North Carolina and Hawaii. That led to the formation of the Black Surfing Association, which coordinates surf safaris throughout the globe.



Surfing is not a new experience for blacks. "The first surfers in the world were black," said Dedon Kamathi, president of BSA. "An Englishman named James Alexander in 1837 wrote about seeing black men riding wooden boards in Ghana and off the coast of West Africa. Surfing was brought to the U.S. by black Hawaiians in 1885. There were beaches in the 1920s and 1930s where black surfers would go. Now we have all kinds of black surfers."

The appeal of surfing for Kamathi, 58, is freedom. "It's a direct experience with nature," he said. "It's kind of spiritual."

Blacks Go Under Water

Not only are African Americans growing in numbers on top of the water, but they're establishing a real presence underwater as well.

The Underwater Adventures Seekers, a Washington, D.C.-based club of scuba diving enthusiasts, will celebrate its 50th anniversary next year. The club has about 130 members and is one of the charter clubs of the National Association of Black Scuba Divers, which was founded in 1991 and numbers about 2,000 members.

"The growth has been phenomenal," said Dr. Jose A. Jones, one of the founders of UAS and NABS. "At one time it was ex-military guys and hardcore divers. But it caught on little by little. TV really did it with shows like 'Sea Hunt' and 'Jacques Cousteau.' Everybody fell in love with diving and the fascination really hasn't stopped."

Dives are arranged by the 20-25 clubs on the local and regional levels, while the national association holds an annual summit, usually in November. Jones said dives have been held “from Australia to Africa,” often attracting large groups that turn the trips into family vacations.

Vernon Beard, current president of NABS, is typical of many of the members. He always had an interest in diving but wasn't certified until he was 45. “The greatest thing is being down there with the fish,” he said. “Whether it's bass, blue gill or a 12-foot shark, just to see a fish underwater is unbelievable. They'll swim up to you and look at you like ‘what are you doing here?’ And when you go to the ocean, that's a whole different animal. It's just a great thrill.”

Most clubs include certified instructors who offer classes that teach new members everything from diving techniques to the proper use of equipment. There are additional programs specifically structured for the youth, who can earn scholarships and other aid from NABS.

The diving isn't all recreational either. A number of NABS members are certified oceanographers and marine biologists who are coordinating dives to discover slave ships that sank centuries ago. “We have trained over two dozens underwater oceanographers so we can go out (and) unearth our own history,” Jones said. “It's not just a bunch of guys and ladies having fun.”

There is plenty of fun, though. “The biggest thrill is teaching scuba diving to kids,” Beard said. “They're our future. I love introducing these inner city kids to a new experience and a lifestyle different from the crap they see on television and on the streets everyday.”

Pounding The Powder

The surfing and scuba diving clubs are much like the National Brotherhood of Skiers in that they offer quality events at group rates. The NBS was founded in 1973 in Aspen, Colorado, uniting 13 local and regional clubs to discuss issues unique to black skiers, as well as socialize.

The first gathering was attended by 350 skiers. Today, there are 77 clubs comprising about 6,000 adults and youngsters, according to NBS president Haymon T. Jahi, who joined the organization in 1989. While the annual summits – “a black convention on skis” – offer an extensive social schedule of skiing, dancing, eating and partying, the primary purpose is



to support the organization's mission to identify, develop and support athletes of color who might one day earn a spot on the U.S. Olympic Ski Team.

“When I meet these kids and their parents, I know all my efforts as a volunteer are not just going to social activities,” Jahi said. “It's going to sponsor people to get the opportunity to represent this country.”

Within the NBS is an emerging group of black snowboarders, who are making their presence known on the slopes.

“There's a certain kind of cowboy mentality that (snowboarders) have,” said Toni Fields, co-founder of Soulboarders. “We ride all day. We're the first people on the slopes and the last people who come off at night. When you see 30 black boarders that are riding hard, people always want to ride with us. A lot of our members are in their 30s or pushing 40s and they're riding with 20-year-olds.”



Members of the Soulboarders take to the slopes.

The common thread between the skiing, diving and surfing organizations is most were born out of not only wanting to socialize with other African Americans, but also incidents of racial discrimination. These days, people see mostly green when the various African-American outdoor clubs plan their travel excursions. As their memberships grow, so does their economic clout.

Equipment manufacturers, travel companies, island resorts and ski lodges all want to do business with the black surfers, scuba divers and skiers. As Jones points out, "It's a multimillion dollar business."

The central appeal of the clubs, however, is the personal instruction and social interactions. "Growing up all you ever heard was basketball, football and baseball," Jahi said. "Now kids can play football, basketball and baseball, but they can snowboard and ski." And they dive and surf, too. **UIM**

George Willis is a sports columnist for the New York Post.