

# A review of the use of closed-circuit rebreathers for scientific diving

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## Abstract

Rebreather diving systems have many advantages to standard open-circuit systems (or SCUBA). Rebreathers offer higher gas efficiency together with silent and bubble-free diving. Moreover, instead of cold and dry gas found in open-circuit systems the diver takes advantage of a warm and humid breathing gas. Stealth (through silent, bubble-free diving) can be beneficial for scientists exploring a range of natural ecological research areas. The high gas efficiency of rebreathers, combined with their lower operational costs, can provide longer autonomy and shortened decompression obligations that may assist the scientist with deeper diving explorations. The present paper gives an overview of today's rebreather technology and focuses especially on the needs of scientific divers. Moreover, it includes a short report about achievements in the field of deep coral explorations, where advanced electronically-controlled closed-loop rebreather systems were the key for efficient and successful missions.

**Keywords:** closed-circuit rebreathers, eCCR, scientific diving, review, coral reef exploration, trimix

## 1. Introduction

Decompression obligations, breathing gas consumption, and thermal considerations can place some limitations on how diving is used for scientific gain. Shallow dives (for example, to 40m depth) can be carried out safely using air but as the depth of the dive increases, the available bottom times decreases. Oxygen (O<sub>2</sub>) enriched oxygen/nitrogen gas mixtures (commonly referred as NITROX) can be employed as an alternative to air; in the simple two-gas mixture the increase of the O<sub>2</sub> fraction of the mixed gas at the expense of the nitrogen (N<sub>2</sub>) fraction reduces the decompression loading and the narcotic potential attributable to N<sub>2</sub> at high partial pressures. The narcotic potential of N<sub>2</sub> means that scientists working beyond 40m often employ Helium (He) enriched gas mixtures

(usually as TRIMIX mixtures of He:O<sub>2</sub>:N<sub>2</sub>). As well as decreasing narcotic potential the other main advantage of TRIMIX is that the partial pressure of O<sub>2</sub> (ppO<sub>2</sub>) is kept low reducing the risk of O<sub>2</sub> toxicity at depth. Furthermore, the addition of He reduces the overall breathing gas density resulting in a decreased breathing workload. TRIMIX diving usually involves slightly longer decompression stops, which are carried out using separate decompression gas mixtures, and slower ascend speeds in order to avoid micro- and macro-bubble formation. In order to carry sufficient gas supplies to support the descent, the working at depth and the different decompression schedules, TRIMIX divers can often end up diving with a number of cylinders, back- and side-mounted. All that equipment can be very bulky and heavy, and can limit scientific diving activities. Closed-circuit rebreathers represent an alternative life-support system for undersea scientific work through reducing the bulk of an open-circuit TRIMIX system by incorporating the principle of rebreathing of the diver's exhaled gases after CO<sub>2</sub> removal and replacement of the metabolised O<sub>2</sub> with fresh O<sub>2</sub> from a supply tank.

There are a number of specific criteria that are necessary in order to make a rebreather suitable for scientific diving. There is an obvious requirement that any system used is safe with a sufficient level of built-in redundancy. The optimal gas composition should balance the needs of a low narcotic potential with short decompression obligations. A low acoustic signature would enhance the possibility for observing and recording nature with minimal anthropogenic impact. A rebreather intended for use by science divers should be easy to use underwater requiring minimum operational input from the diver during the diving operation in order to maximise the research output. Out of the water, the unit should be easy to maintain and straightforward to train on so that the scientific "downtime" is minimised. Finally, a smaller and lighter system will increase the mobility of the scientist underwater.

## 2. Coral reef exploration

Coral reefs have been reasonably well investigated down to depths of 40–50msw, mostly using conventional SCUBA equipment. Depths below 150m have been researched mostly with submersibles and unmanned vehicles (AUVs, ROVs). In contrast to these two undersea regions, very little is known about the intermediate zone between 50msw and 150msw – variously referred to as the coral-reef “Twilight Zone” and more recently “Mesophotic Coral Ecosystems”. This zone has been the focus of a series of exploratory expeditions by the second author, from 1988 through to the present (Pyle, 1991, 1992, 1996a,b, 1998, 2000). From 1988 through 1993, these dives were conducted using open-circuit TRIMIX gear; and from 1994 until the present they were made using mixed-gas electronically-controlled closed-circuit rebreather systems (eCCR; Cis-Lunar Mk4P and Mk5P systems).

## 3. Efficiency of open circuit diving

A typical open-circuit diving system (SCUBA) for recreational purposes consists of a single gas storage cylinder (typically 7–18L with filling pressures from 200–300bar) and a two-stage pressure regulator (NOAA Diving Manual, 2001; U.S. Navy Diving Manual, 2008). The first stage of the two-stage regulator reduces the tank’s pressure to an intermediate pressure around 8–10bar higher than ambient pressure. Through allowing the water to have direct access to the second stage diaphragm, the regulator reduces the intermediate pressure to ambient pressure, thus allowing the diver to breathe with minimal resistance. Exhaled air is then vented through an exhaust valve into the water. The maximum time a diver can stay under water is determined mainly by the amount of gas being carried, the depth of the dive, and the diver’s breathing rate and volume.

A normal relaxed diver metabolises approximately  $0.8\text{--}1.0\text{barLmin}^{-1}$   $\text{O}_2$  (Ehm et al., 2003). This  $\text{O}_2$  consumption may increase up to  $2.5\text{--}3.5\text{barLmin}^{-1}$  in the case of hard physical activities. As an example: a diver has a surface breathing minute volume of  $25\text{barLmin}^{-1}$ ; this volume contains approximately  $5.25\text{barLmin}^{-1}$   $\text{O}_2$ . However, only  $0.8\text{barLmin}^{-1}$   $\text{O}_2$  is metabolised which is equivalent to a gas efficiency of approximately 3% (only 0.8barL of the total 25barL gas supply are being used by the diver). As the pressure increases with depth, this ratio decreases: at 40msw a diver breathing at a surface-equivalent rate of  $25\text{Lmin}^{-1}$  will consume  $125\text{barLmin}^{-1}$  because of the increased pressure (5bar absolute at 40msw compared with 1bar at sea-level). The  $\text{O}_2$  metabolism rate remains at  $0.8\text{barLmin}^{-1}$  and so the gas

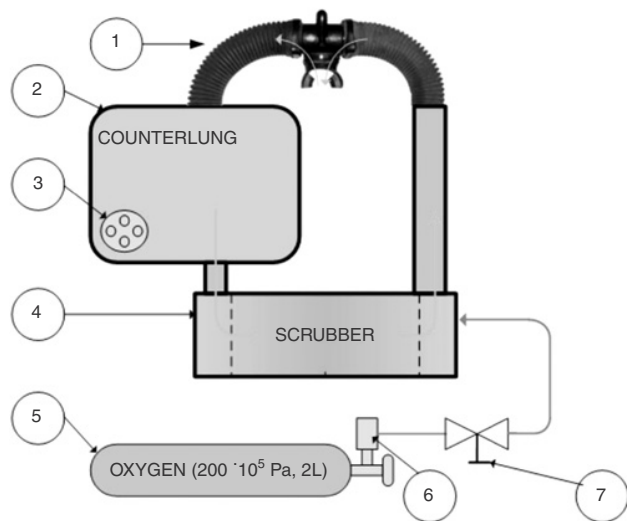
efficiency at 40m drops to approximately 0.6% ( $0.8$  from  $125\text{barLmin}^{-1}$ ). A cylinder with 10L volume pressurised to 200bar contains an equivalent of 2000L which, when breathing at  $125\text{Lmin}^{-1}$  (and assuming no reserves), would last 16min. At a depth of 100msw, the efficiency drops to 0.3% and, largely for this reason, conducting dives to 100msw or more using open-circuit equipment is impractical because an enormous amount of gas supply needed. Those needs at greater depths are then multiplied by long decompression obligations that may last several hours.

Large volumes of gas carried in a SCUBA rig obviously become very bulky and limit the diver’s ability to move freely, hampering many kinds of research activities. However, large gas consumption also carries a cost issue, especially when it comes to expensive He-enriched gas mixtures. Open-circuit diving also carries additional drawbacks such as cold caused by adiabatic cooling during gas expansion and the prolonged breathing of dry gases. Even though the diver may be limited to a small number of breathing mixtures (optimised for decompression purposes for use only at specific depths) each tank may weigh *circa* 20kg and the diver may be carrying six to eight tanks. Such a diving rig can be very bulky and limits the diver’s ability to move freely, hampering some kinds of research activities.

## 4. Rebreathers

The efficiency of gas breathing can be increased by using a rebreather (Mount and Gilliam, 1992; Shreeves and Richardson, 2006). When using open-circuit SCUBA the exhaled gas is vented into the surrounding water, where it is wasted. In a rebreather, the exhaust breath is recirculated through a loop (e.g. Figure 1, which shows the schematics of a simple oxygen rebreather), into a flexible bag (the so-called counterlung). A chemical absorbent material removes carbon dioxide followed by the addition of fresh gas to substitute for the metabolised  $\text{O}_2$  content. The recycled gas is then inhaled by the diver again.

All rebreathers, irrespective of the gas mixtures being used, carry a risk of oxygen toxicity which is a factor of the oxygen content of the mixture and the depth at which it is being breathed. The partial pressure of  $\text{O}_2$  ( $\text{ppO}_2$ ) inside the loop is dependent on the ambient pressure (equivalent to depth); pressure increases through a linear relationship of 1bar pressure for every 10msw (plus the surface pressure of 1bar exerted by the atmosphere), with the partial pressure relationship adhering to Dalton’s Law of Partial Pressures. The present recommended  $\text{ppO}_2$  limits for diving



**Fig 1:** Schematics of an O<sub>2</sub> rebreather (1: mouthpiece, 2: counterlung, 3: overpressure valve, 4: scrubber, 5: oxygen tank, 6: first stage pressure regulator, 7: manual valve)

breathing gases range from 0.14bar (14.1kPa) to 1.6bar (162kPa). Breathing gas mixtures containing ppO<sub>2</sub> levels above the upper limit increases the potential for acute oxygen toxicity, manifested as an epileptiform convulsion, which underwater is likely to be fatal as the diver could lose his mouthpiece, inhale water and drown; breathing gases with ppO<sub>2</sub> values below 0.14bar (14.1kPa) risks unconsciousness.

Using a ppO<sub>2</sub> limit of 1.6bar limits the depth for pure O<sub>2</sub> rebreathers to 6msw, and pure O<sub>2</sub> rebreathers are usually used only for military applications. Deeper rebreather diving requires a diluent gas in the loop to maintain a constant (but sometimes variable) ppO<sub>2</sub> value even as pressure increases.

Rebreathers are classified as either semi-closed circuit rebreathers (SCRs) or manually or electronically controlled closed-circuit rebreathers (mCCR or eCCR, respectively). The constant mass flow SCR is the simplest form of a SCR. In such a system O<sub>2</sub>-enriched air enters the breathing loop via a constant flow injector (typically at 6–12barLmin<sup>-1</sup> depending on the oxygen content of the gas which, in turn, is influenced by the safe maximum operating depth for that mixture) from a relatively small tank to substitute the metabolised O<sub>2</sub>. As the volume of the breathing loop gradually increases, a corresponding amount of excessive gas is then vented through an overpressure valve. SCRs are easy to use, easy to maintain and usually do not need electronics for a safe operation. Even though a certain amount of gas is vented, the acoustic signature is already dramatically reduced in comparison to open-circuit, especially when a so

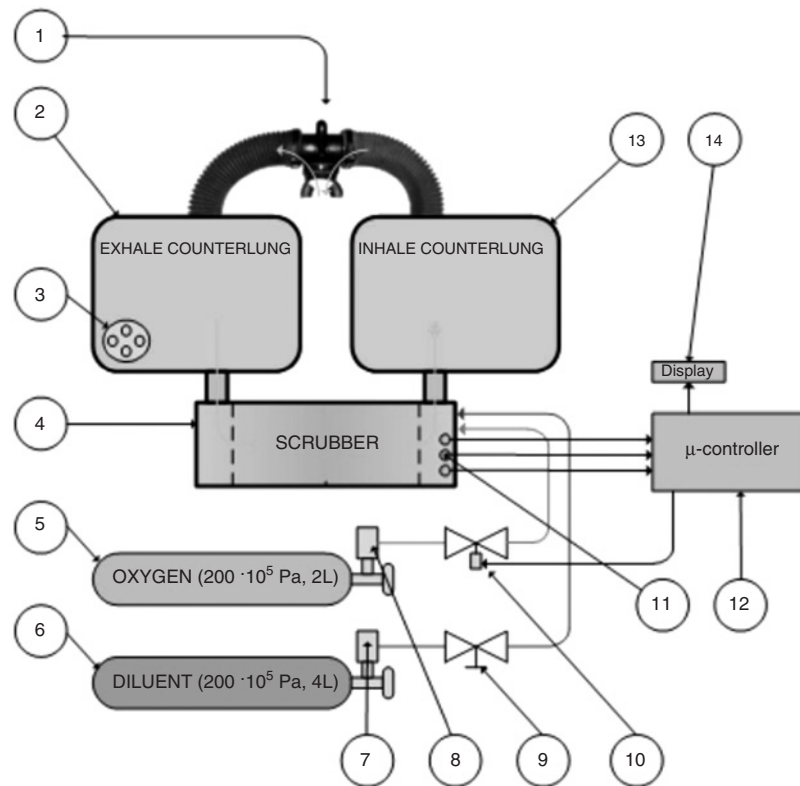
called “bubble diffuser” is installed. This particular advantage, which allows closer interaction with life-forms, made the SCR units popular with underwater photographers, cameramen and also researchers (e.g. Sayer and Poonian, 2007).

In a mCCR or an eCCR the ppO<sub>2</sub> is usually kept at constant level with only the metabolised O<sub>2</sub> being replaced from a separate source of 100% O<sub>2</sub> (Figure 2). The breathing gas in a closed rebreather contains also N<sub>2</sub> and/or He in the form of “diluent gas” in order to maintain a safe ppO<sub>2</sub> limit while avoiding any narcotic effects of high ppN<sub>2</sub> levels. The diluent gas can be supplied either in the forms of air or TRIMIX from a separate tank (Figure 2). To keep the ppO<sub>2</sub> at a constant level, a control system is needed and electrochemical oxygen sensors, whose output signal is proportional to the partial pressure of O<sub>2</sub>, provide a feedback mechanism (Baran, 2004). In a mCCR, the diver reads the ppO<sub>2</sub> from a display and, if needed, adds O<sub>2</sub> manually. In an eCCR, this regulation task is usually performed with a combination of microcontroller solenoid valves (Straw, 2005).

As outlined above, open-circuit SCUBA diving has low gas utilisation efficiency, varying from less than 5% on the surface, to below 0.5% at 100msw. With CCRs, because the breathing gas is recycled and, under optimal conditions, only the metabolised O<sub>2</sub> is replaced, gas efficiency may approach 100%. This high efficiency rate permits the design of comparatively small, lightweight systems where gas costs and supply are no longer significant limiting factors. In addition, because of the recirculation with minimal wastage, CCRs allow bubble-free, silent diving. Only during the ascent is gas vented from the circuit caused by the gas volume in the loop increasing inversely in proportion to the decreasing pressure. Another advantage of using rebreathers is that the breathing gas is usually warm and humid, caused by the chemical process of CO<sub>2</sub> absorption in the scrubber canister, producing water and heat as by-products. Finally, because the CCR maintains a constant ppO<sub>2</sub>, the breathing mixture is optimised for decompression purposes at all points during the dive.

## 5. Limitations of closed circuit rebreathers

One of the main problems of rebreathers in comparison with SCUBA is the increased complexity of the breathing system. While a failure in open-circuit is usually quite easy for most divers to detect and correct, problems with CCRs may often be hidden and may have an increased potential to cause harm or be fatal (Vann et al., 2007, Central Database of Rebreather Fatalities). The most commonly identified systems failures which have the potential



**Fig 2:** Schematics of an electronic closed-circuit rebreather (eCCR; 1: mouthpiece, 2: exhale counterlung, 3: overpressure valve, 4: scrubber, 5: oxygen tank, 6: diluent tank, 7, 8: pressure regulators, 9: manual diluent valve, 10: solenoid, 11: pO<sub>2</sub> sensors, 12:  $\mu$ -processor, 13: inhale counterlung, 14: display)

to be life threatening are a loss of maintenance of ppO<sub>2</sub> levels outside of life-sustaining limits, increased CO<sub>2</sub> levels and water leakage into the breathing circuit.

High CO<sub>2</sub> levels can be avoided through efficient scrubber design combined with conservative scrubber management. Latest developments use pre-packed scrubbers to avoid poor scrubber filling methods which may cause channelling which can raise CO<sub>2</sub> levels through ineffective contact. Scrubber efficiency may also be impaired in cold temperatures and should be well-researched before use in extreme environments.

Water ingress to the breathing circuit can result in a reaction with the scrubber chemicals to cause the so called 'caustic cocktail'. Some CCRs address this issue by incorporating hydrophobic membranes at the inlet and/or the outlet of the scrubber in order to prevent water from entering or leaving the scrubber.

A malfunction of the control system, irrespective of whether it is manual or automatic control, may easily result in dangerously high or low ppO<sub>2</sub> values inside the breathing loop. Solenoid valves (that replace the metabolised oxygen in automatic control systems) and manually actuated mechanical gas injection devices, like orifices or gas bypasses, can be designed very robustly and

are usually reliable. Failures can be detected easily and, in the case of a good system design, the problem can be resolved. The state of the art for the electronic components is to use redundant designs and/or networks of microcontrollers where incorrect function of one node can be detected by the others which, in turn, can trigger an alarm. The weakest elements in any ppO<sub>2</sub> control system within a rebreather are the ppO<sub>2</sub> sensors.

## 6. ppO<sub>2</sub> measurement

Current rebreathers use electrochemical ppO<sub>2</sub> sensors, each one consisting of two electrodes of dissimilar metals. The cathode is made from a noble metal behind a diffusion barrier (usually Teflon); the anode is usually made from lead. The electrodes are held in contact with a liquid or semisolid basic electrolyte, usually potassium hydroxide; when the sensor is exposed to the breathing gas, O<sub>2</sub> diffuses through the teflon membrane and is chemically reduced at the surface of the cathode to hydroxyl ions. The hydroxyl ions then flow toward the lead anode, where an oxidation reaction occurs generating an electrical current proportional to the ppO<sub>2</sub>. In most cases, a resistor is incorporated in the electrical circuit, thus the output from the sensor is measured in mV. Many sensors incorporate temperature compensation in the electronics.



Typical specifications for an O<sub>2</sub> sensor for diving purposes are measurement ranges of 0–100% and 0–2bar O<sub>2</sub>, a signal output of 8–13mV at 0.21bar O<sub>2</sub> with a linear slope of 40–65mV per bar O<sub>2</sub> pressure, and a 90% response time of 6s. In the reaction with O<sub>2</sub>, the anode is partially consumed which is the limiting factor determining the lifetime of the sensor, typically 12–24 months.

O<sub>2</sub> sensors typically fail because of non-linear responses to O<sub>2</sub> concentrations, current limitation (the output signal of the sensor is limited thus will remain constant above a certain ppO<sub>2</sub>), a slow signal response and mechanical or electrical damage. The most common failure mode is not achieving the correct electrical output for a given ppO<sub>2</sub> resulting in a rapid delivery of a breathing gas with a composition outwith life-sustaining limits. Non-linearity and current limitation may deliver potentially dangerous elevations of ppO<sub>2</sub> if measurement is in error below the maximum safe operating limits.

Until recently, ppO<sub>2</sub> was normally measured in commercially-available rebreathers through the use of three oxygen sensors with some form of voting logic to determine the correct ppO<sub>2</sub>: the three sensor signals were continuously compared with each other; if one sensor output was deviating from the other two it was voted as faulty and not used for further ppO<sub>2</sub> control. Such a design, normally referred to as a “voting algorithm”, implicitly assumes that sensor failures are independent and that no two sensors would fail at the same time from the same cause. A new approach is based on automatic and true validations of the performance of an O<sub>2</sub> sensor throughout the dive (Sieber et al., 2008; Shreeves, 2009). This is done by periodically exposing the primary sensor to a known ppO<sub>2</sub> and determining that the sensor responds correctly. This is achieved by injection of diluent gas and O<sub>2</sub> directly in front of the sensor membrane which permits determination of correct sensor behaviour as well as ensuring a linear response into the hyperoxic region. Use of a second (truly redundant) pO<sub>2</sub> sensor allows detection of other classes of failures, including leaking solenoids.

In order to work efficiently underwater, the scientific diver must be able to concentrate on the main project objectives but often within the context of limited bottom times and/or where additional bottom time generates unrealistic decompression obligations. eCCRs generally work autonomously although require attention and intervention from the user like, for example, continuously monitoring the ppO<sub>2</sub> sensors and validating the control system by flushing the loop with diluent manually. However, these tasks interrupt work flow and, as a consequence, can

reduce efficiency of the scientific diver. Automation of these tasks with microcontrollers may be a solution to reduce workload, increase operation safety, improve efficiency (including a reduced training requirement) and reduce pre- and post-dive preparation/maintenance of the unit.

## 7. Conclusions

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In the years between 1994 and the present, several expeditions employed deep-diving techniques to explore deep coral reefs. During that time, more than a hundred new species of fishes have been discovered (Pyle et al., 2008). The rate of discovery increased from about seven new species of fishes discovered per hour of exploration time with open-circuit TRIMIX gear, to more than eleven per hour when using rebreathers (Pyle et al., 2008). Comparisons between open-circuit TRIMIX and mixed-gas CCR, showed the CCR to generate seven times more productive bottom time relative to support time (Parrish and Pyle, 2001, 2002). Besides increased efficiency, the CCRs had lower operational costs (in the case of TRIMIX diving) because of the reduction in wastage. Studies have shown that divers observe much higher numbers of fish while using rebreathers compared with using open-circuit (Sayer and Poonian, 2007).

Many studies have demonstrated the potential of rebreathers to maximise the working efficiency of scientific divers. However, rebreathers are used in scientific diving rarely, mainly because of the complexity of the systems, the required high level of training and the time taken with pre- and post-unit maintenance. Full automation has the potential to optimise the diving time while reducing distractions such as continuous system monitoring or improving the ease of routine monitoring through the employment of head up displays (HUDs) that, in case of a failure, prompt the diver to switch to open circuit or an alternative redundant breathing loop. Unfortunately today there is no automatic and completely redundant rebreather on the market that supports deep explorations. The introduction of an automated system with full TRIMIX capability and redundant operation modes (manual control and semi closed modes) will present a host of new opportunities for the diving scientist.

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# THE OPERATION OF AUTONOMOUS UNDERWATER VEHICLES

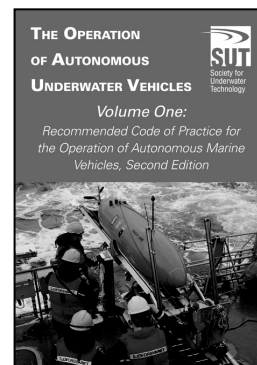
**Volume One: Recommended Code of Practice for  
the Operation of Autonomous Marine Vehicles,  
Second Edition**

ISBN 0 906940 51 6

ISBN-13 978 0 906940 51 8

Paperback edition 2009

Published by SUT; 77 pages



**Price: £75**

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This is the first update to the pioneering *The Operation of Autonomous Underwater Vehicles, Volume One: Recommended Code of Practice*, published in 2000. Since then, a great deal of experience has been gained in the operation of these vehicles, and related matters – such as insurance and the legal aspects – informs this update. Since any AUV will spend time on the surface, the ambit of this code has been extended to include this, and the vehicles are now classified as autonomous marine vehicles (AMV). It is intended that this code will be widely taken up by the industry, and the relevant parts will eventually be incorporated in international maritime law.

This AMV CoP has been written as a voluntary code that the SUT endorses for adoption by the AMV community. It is a non-legal document which encapsulates the combined experience of the members of the AUVLWG, spanning most – if not all – aspects of civil and military AMVs and should be regarded as a guide, based on best practice, to the issues to be considered in the design, build, and operation of an AMV. The code is primarily aimed at the users, designers, researchers, and manufacturers of AMV systems in the United Kingdom. Though the CoP is focused on the UK, it is believed by both the AUVLWG and the SUT that it could be used as a basis of a codified procedure to be adopted by the international AMV community.



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