Drink and dive? Just say nada!

After a day of diving, many divers like to unwind back on shore or on the liveaboard with a glass of wine or a cold beer, right? All fine and good. There are many ways to enjoy a trip, but diving while under the influence of alcohol is not one of them. If you plan to drink, it's important to do it responsibly and in a way that won't affect your diving, like after your diving is done!

A practical study showed that experienced divers with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of only 0.04 percent (the equivalent of two 0,35-liters beers over one hour on an empty stomach for a 80-kg man) had significantly compromised ability to perform the skills necessary for diving safely. At lower BACs, situational awareness and inhibition may be lowered, leading a diver to take unsafe actions in the water. Impaired judgment and slow reaction time can compound a bad situation — a fact borne out by alcohol being involved in roughly 50 percent of traffic accidents by people of drinking age and associated with as many as 70 percent of deaths related to water recreation. Not good!

Recent alcohol intake can potentially also contribute to dehydration in divers, which can be a risk factor for decompression sickness. Breathing dry air, along with immersion and cold temperatures, can exacerbate pre existing dehydration. Alcohol may also enhance the effects of nitrogen narcosis, which when combined with elevated BAC and dehydration, can lead to otherwise preventable accidents.

If boating is part of your dive trip, there are additional risk factors to consider. According to 2017 U.S. Coast Guard statistics, alcohol use is the fifth-highest contributing factor to boating accidents and the number-one contributing factor to deaths in those accidents. Not only does alcohol cause accidents, but intoxication combined with operator inattention, inexperience or machinery failure also makes the accidents much more likely to be fatal. So take heed.

While a drink or two with friends might be just the thing after a day of underwater exploration, don’t forget that a relatively safe activity can quickly become much less so when mixing alcohol with diving. Save your mixing for nitrox instead! Safe diving!