

If you're an underwater photographer like me, you know the excitement of reviewing your shots right after a dive: the colors pop, the focus seems perfect, and those close encounters with marine life look stunning on your camera's LCD screen. Then you get back to your laptop and boom — those same images appear soft, lack sharpness, or just don't meet your expectations. What's going on? Why do underwater photos sometimes look fine on the camera but soft on the laptop? After twelve years shooting from small day boats to multi-week liveaboards, and yes, flooding exactly one housing early on (lesson learned!), I've gathered some hard-earned tips to help you avoid common pitfalls and improve the sharpness and reliability of your underwater images.

Check Full Size Focus, Not Just the LCD Preview

One of the first things to understand is that your camera's LCD screen offers a compressed, small preview of your photos. This preview often resizes the image and applies sharpening and noise reductions that make pictures appear crisper than they really are. Don't rely solely on the tiny LCD to judge focus. Instead:

- **Check full size focus** on your computer by opening representative frames at 100% zoom.
- Look at critical areas like the eyes of fish or fine textures on corals.
- Use image-editing software to view shooting metadata like aperture and shutter speed to verify settings.
- Beware of auto-enhanced JPEGs on camera displays — RAW files offer a better chance of correcting softness later.

Always **review representative frames** during your dive day and not just the "good" ones that look sharp on the LCD. Sometimes your camera may get close, but focus isn't hitting your intended target perfectly, especially when shooting fast-moving subjects underwater.

Fatigue and Technique — The Hidden Culprit

Spending long days underwater often leads to fatigue that can subtly degrade your shooting technique:

- Handholding a bulky underwater camera housing with buttons, dials, and hinges means if you slip or push the wrong control, your composition and focus can suffer.
- Fatigue reduces your ability to hold your camera steady, leading to slightly blurred images, especially in low light.
- Stress and rushing can rush autofocus and quick shots without proper composition.

To combat this, incorporate regular rest intervals between dives and develop muscle memory with your housing controls. Knowing where every button and dial is by feel alone helps maintain consistent technique. Also, maintain a calm breathing rhythm during each shot to minimize motion.



Saltwater Removal Before Opening Housings — Why It Matters

One common cause of soft images isn't in your shooting but divephotoguide.com in the care of your **underwater camera housing**. When saltwater creeps inside your housing due to small leaks or floods, it can cause serious issues:

- Salt crystals form on buttons, dials, hinges, and inside electrical connections, which may hamper camera performance.
- Corrosion quietly eats away at contacts and seals.
- Dirt, grit, or fine sand can stick stubbornly around o-rings or controls, reducing their smoothness and creating micro movements affecting focus and functionality.

To prevent this, never open your housing immediately after a dive while it still has saltwater on the surface. Instead:

1. **Thoroughly rinse**
2. **If you use shared rinse tanks on boats, be extremely cautious (*more on this below*).**
3. **Dry your housing carefully after rinsing, especially around hinges and electrical contacts.**

Safe Handling in Shared Rinse Tanks

On group dives and liveboards, it's tempting to toss multiple housings into the same rinse tank to save time. However, this practice can cause problems:

- Housings banging together can cause scratches on ports or tiny impact damage that impairs seals.
- Water movement may drive grit or salt residue between buttons or into hinge crevices.
- Cross-contamination of contaminants, such as sunscreen residue, oils, or even small parts breaking off.

To safeguard your gear, I always keep housings separated — even if it means using multiple small rinse buckets or hanging them individually on rinsing racks. Minimal contact means less risk of damage or dirt transfer affecting housing function. If everyone follows this habit and respects each other's gear, your dives become smoother and safer.

Dry Workspace Habits to Avoid Corrosion

Just as important as proper rinsing is establishing a clean, dry workspace for maintenance and housing prep:

- After rinsing, wipe your housing dry with a microfiber cloth, paying special attention to **buttons, dials, hinges, and electrical connections**.
- Store your housing in a cool, dry place to prevent salt fogging and corrosion.
- Keep sealing surfaces and o-rings free of dirt and moisture — use your dedicated flashlight to inspect o-rings before each dive.
- Label chargers and cables with masking tape to avoid mix-ups during travel. This small habit helps maintain workflow and avoid frantic mistakes.

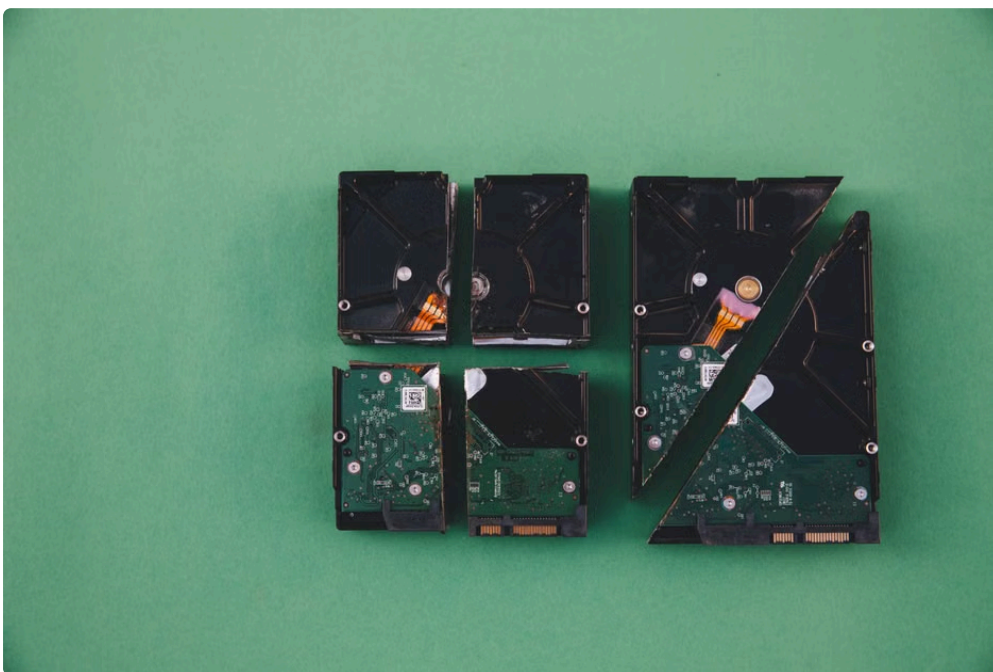
The better care you take of your housing, the more reliable your camera's controls will be — which directly impacts your ability to focus accurately and shoot sharp images.

Two-Device Backups and Verification — Don't Lose Your Best Shots

One of the most frustrating experiences is editing hours of photos only to realize some are soft or missing due to file corruption or accidental deletion. Here's my tried and true backup routine:

1. Immediately after each dive day, **back up your cards to two separate devices** — for example, a laptop and an external hard drive.
2. **Verify the backups** by spot-checking files for completeness and opening representative frames at full size.
3. **Avoid editing for hours before making the second backup.** Editing should be done on verified safe copies.
4. Never format cards in the camera on day one without checking backups thoroughly. Many flooding incidents started from trying to reuse cards prematurely.

This workflow prevents accidental loss and ensures your images remain pristine for post-processing.



Additional Tips from My Experience

- **Label all cables and chargers** — Keeping equipment organized prevents scrambling in dive boats or liveaboard cabins.
- **Keep a tiny flashlight just for o-ring inspections** — bright light helps confirm there's no debris or damage.
- **Never leave housings banging** in rinse tanks — treat your and others' gear with respect to avoid cumulative damage.
- **Remember grease only facilitates the seal; it does not itself create it.** Properly cleaned and seated o-rings are your real defense against flooding.

Summary Table: Common Causes of Soft Images and How to Fix Them

Issue	Cause	Solution
Soft images on laptop but sharp on camera LCD	Small LCD preview misleads focus judgment	Check full size focus on computer; review representative frames
Blurred photos despite good focus	Fatigue, poor technique, motion blur	Rest between dives; improve handholding skills; calm breathing
Camera malfunction causing soft focus	Camera malfunction	
Salt residues on buttons, dials, electrical contacts	Rinse saltwater thoroughly before housing opening; maintain dry workspace	
Damaged housing seals or ports	Housings banging in shared rinse tanks	Handle housings separately to prevent contact damage
Loss or corruption of photos	No proper backups; premature card formatting	Two-device backups; verify files; avoid early formatting

Final Thoughts

Underwater photography is both thrilling and challenging. With the complexity of waterproof housings and demanding environments, it's easy to miss subtle technical details that affect image sharpness. By focusing on rigorous **full size focus checks**, managing fatigue to maintain shooting technique, handling your housing properly with saltwater removal and dry workspace habits, plus implementing robust backup strategies, you greatly improve both your images' quality and your overall diving experience.

Remember, thriving underwater photographers don't just take pictures — they nurture their gear and workflow with patience and care. I hope these tips help you conquer the dreaded "soft photo" syndrome once and for all!