

INTRODUCING SEABASE I

A Bold Step in Undersea Research,
Education and Eco-tourism



Dr. Richard Cooper poses with a scale model of SeaBase I.

By Kathy Reed, Senior Editor

From the beginning, human curiosity has driven us to explore, pushing us to the edge of our physical world and beyond. We've reached beyond our earthly confines to the stars, and we've only just begun to explore the depths of what our world's oceans have to offer.

While only a few of us will achieve the status of astronaut, many more of us have the opportunity and ability to become aquanauts. A new project proposed by retired University of Connecticut professor emeritus of marine science, Richard Cooper, will open a new door to certified scuba divers all over the world.

SeaBase I, a large, shallow water undersea habitat utilizing a new, innovative design, is proposed to be completed by 2013 and, subject to government approvals and the completion of an environmental impact assessment, placed in a coral reef system off Ambergris Caye, Belize. A non-profit endeavor, its purpose will be the development of underwater research, education and eco-tourism facilities, or REEFs™. Those concepts represent the significance of the program and its uniqueness.

"A lot of the technologies we were developing were not really available to the average scientist or student, and it was

especially not available to the certified scuba diver," Cooper, 74, told Dive News. "With virtually all the ocean floor habitat programs we've done to date, we've tried hard to make them research and educational facilities. After we made a few mistakes, we learned how to operate more safely and more productively, such as Aquarius, the only one in operation right now for research and education off the Key Largo, Fla., area."

Unlike past underwater habitat programs that could only accommodate five or six aquanauts, SeaBase I will be able to house up to 25 aquanauts at a time. The massive four-story, 40-by-60-foot habitat will allow visits anywhere from a few days to a few months, to test the concept of long term human habitation of the ocean floor. The ultimate goal of the SeaBase project is to bring underwater scientific research, education and certified recreational scuba divers together.

"We're going after the certified scuba diver, or eco-tourist," said Cooper. "Many of your experienced divers are really anxious to become part of something that's unique and constructive and beneficial."

Former underwater habitat scientist and consultant Kenn Feigelman, currently the director of operations of Deep/Quest 2 Expeditions in Ontario, Canada, has come on board to help promote SeaBase. His company will be involved in filming the project from conception to completion. Feigelman, who has been involved with a couple of simple underwater habitats, such as Sublimnos, which was placed in Georgian Bay near Tobermory, Ontario in 1969, will be among the first group of aquanauts to stay in the habitat.

"Sublimnos is a mere shadow of what SeaBase I is slated to be. Unlike other underwater habitats, which were placed deeper and were strictly for scientific personnel, SeaBase is going to be inviting divers, as eco tourists, to come and see the habitat," Feigelman said. "This is a modern day habitat. It's going to be constructed of ferro-cement and built in modular form, shaped like a Mayan pyramid, in honor of the Mayan people who live and still reside in and around Belize and that area of Central America."

SeaBase will rest in just 60 feet of water, making it easily accessible to this new breed of citizen scientist. Long periods of decompression, mandatory for other deep sea habitats, will no longer be necessary.

"The whole habitat will be pressurized to 21 feet, which means we can go down for a three hour stay, or be down there for three weeks or three months, and not require lengthy decompression to surface," explained Cooper.



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