

PINNACLE PORTRAIT: *The Future of E-6*

Jack & Sue Drafahl

Technical writer team Jack and Sue Drafahl were asked to assess the status of E-6 in the imaging industry. They went about it the practical way; reviewing data and asking lab owners. Primary data came from Photo Marketing Association (PMA) data research. Secondary information came from processing labs, film processor manufacturers and the writers' own experience.

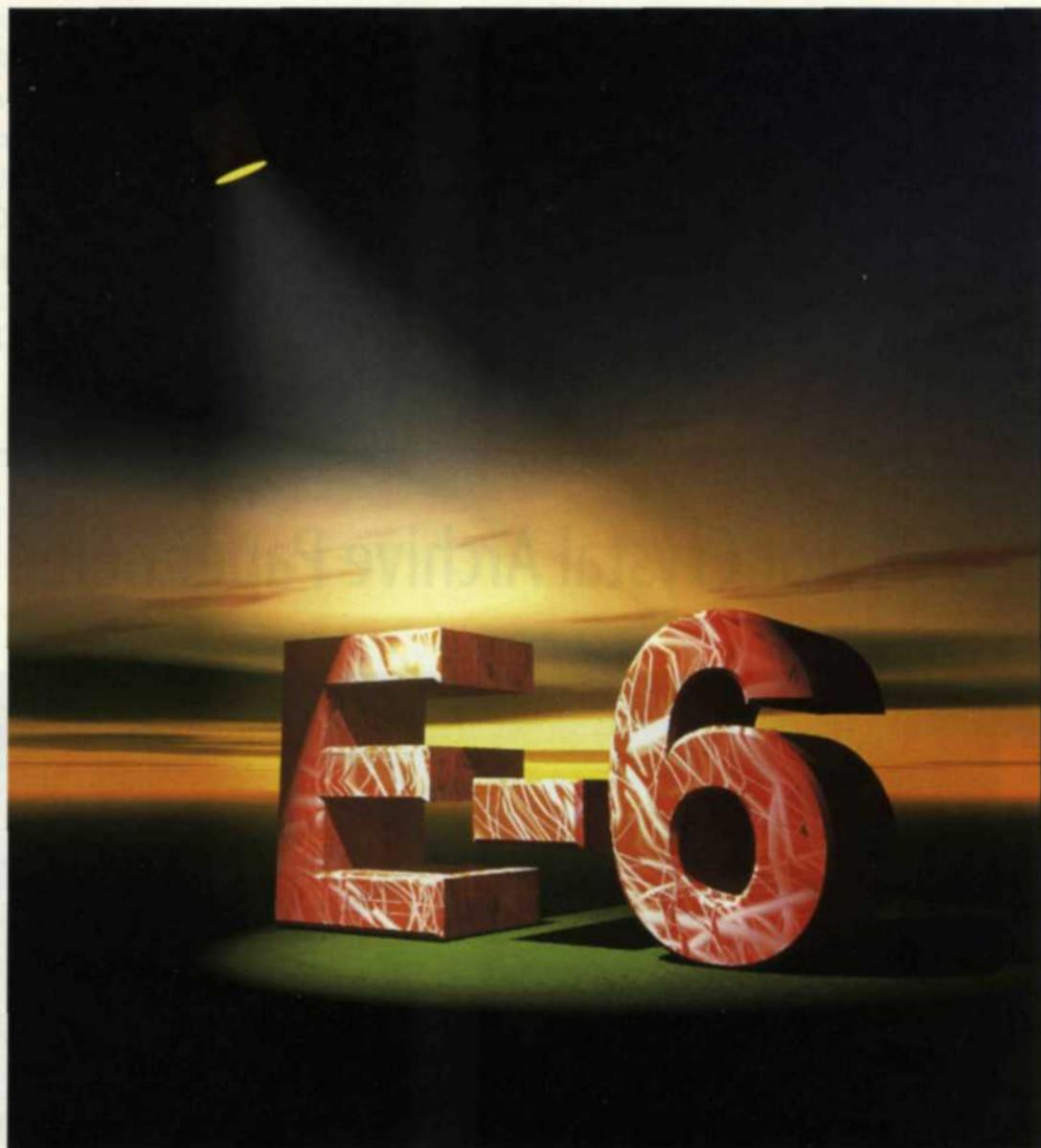
EARLIER THIS year, we had the pleasure of spending a working vacation in Fiji. The first leg of our journey was on a 120' dive boat called the Nai'a. On the second day of our trip, we stopped at one of the best dive spots in the world: a 3000' high underwater pinnacle rises straight up

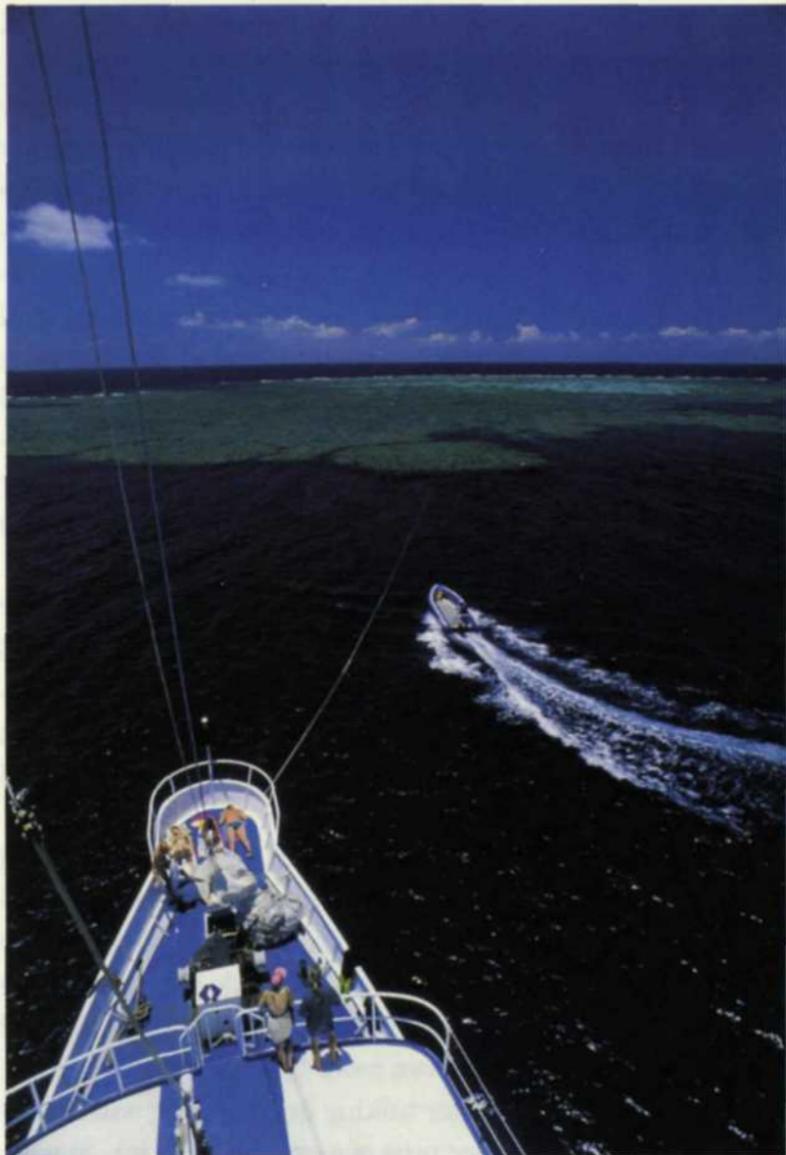
from the ocean floor and just barely touches the surface. Now you might ask, "What does our diving trip have to do with *Photo Lab Management*?"

When underwater photographers first started diving this fabulous underwater pinnacle, they shot so much slide film that the E-6 pro-

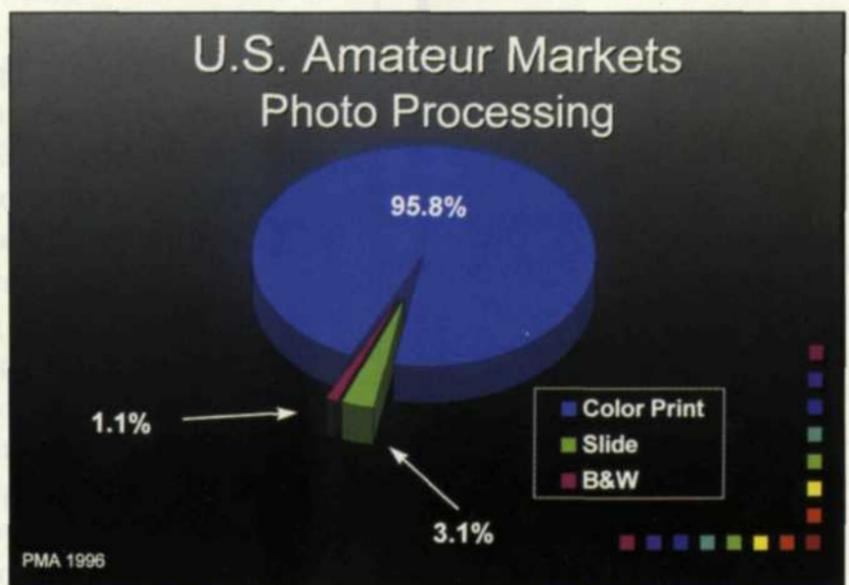
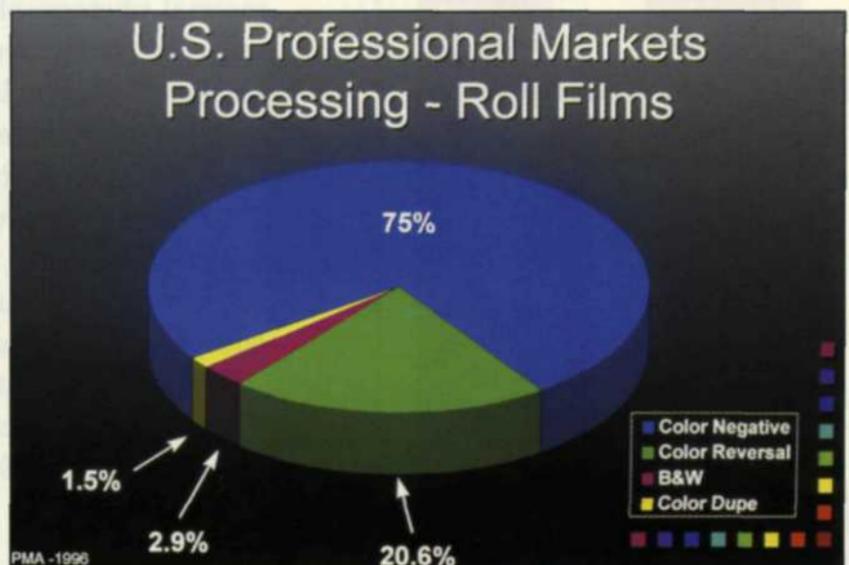
cessing lab onboard went into to maximum overdrive. From that time on, the dive site became know as E-6. As far as we know, it is the only place on earth named after E-6 processing.

When we returned from our trip, we reviewed our next assignment from *PLM*, and coincidentally, the subject





Dive spot near Fiji: E-6 paradise!



was E-6. The question is, "Where is E-6 processing and related transparency films headed as we approach the year 2000?" At first we thought this would be an easy assignment, but it turned out to be a challenge.

We knew we might be biased by the PMA research if we reviewed those numbers first, so we saved them for last. We started our E-6 journey by talking with a manufacturer of film processors.

Switch to C-41?

Over the last few years, manufacturers have noticed a drop in the use of E-6 processing by the newspaper industry and in-house corporation labs. The reason for the switch to C-41 seems to be twofold: the color negative images offer more flexibility in latitude for shooting, faster processing times, and the negs can be scanned into the computer and converted to a

black-and-white image.

The medical/scientific industry still favors the E-6 processor. It's a single-step process, and the original can be projected or attached to a patient's file for easy viewing.

We then asked how digital cameras are impacting the film processor business. Digital cameras, it seems, helped spark an interest in photography, thus increasing all types of photographic processing, including E-6.

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Interviews with managers of labs that service both professional and amateur photographers indicate a split in E-6 product usage. It appears that the amateur use of transparency film has dropped to a very small amount, while the pro labs are noticing an increase in their E-6 processing business. One of the amateur labs stated that it had a drop in E-6 processing, due to the increase of labs in the area providing E-6 processing.

One pro lab stated its E-6 numbers had increased because many commercial photographers wanted absolute color control over sequential photo session. The same lab noted, however, that the very large film format sizes have dropped off, indicating that budget restrictions are now becoming a consideration. We then asked these owners if they thought digital had an effect on their E-6 usage.

There was a consensus that digital has more of an effect on the C-41 client base, and users of E-6 were not quickly switching to digital.

The Data

The PMA data reports were quite extensive and took us several hours to sift down to the bare facts on E-6 usage. The results re-enforced what we had heard from those we talked to in the industry. The amateur photographer uses only a small portion of the E-6 films and processing. In fact, from the numbers we reviewed, you might be in trouble if your lab only services E-6 processing to amateur photographers.

In 1996 slide processing made up only 3.1 % of the total film processing for the year. But, even that small percentage of the total 17.5 billion exposures amounted to 545 million E-6 processed exposures!

The numbers from the professional marketplace offered a completely different picture. From 1993 to 1996, color reversal roll film products went from 20.8% to 20.6%. This was almost no change, showing the consistency of chrome usage. Sheet film usage had a slight increase from 64.8% to 65.8%, making it the E-6 leader. Chrome

sheet film usage showed a great lead over color negative usage.

When we try to analyze exactly how E-6 is faring, we find it tough to really sort out the truth. If you look at the numbers, pros shoot a lot more E-6 related films than amateur photographers. Since most people speaking and writing to the public and representing the photo industry are pros, they tend to bias their presentations towards E-6 films. Thus, you often read and hear more about the use of E-6 products than really exists.

So, after more than 25 years of our own slide usage, where do we see E-6 heading? We don't see digital photography as a competitive media, but rather one that gets people jazzed about photography.

We see film as a very viable method for capturing images, especially to digital via a scanner. In the amateur industry, we do think that the usage ratio of color print film to slide film will shift even more towards negative film.

After talking and working with many other pros, we even see the pro market slowly migrating towards C-41, although E-6 is still strong enough to warrant continuing research and development by the film manufacturers.

A wise photo lab manager should always keep numbers on the amount of E-6, C-41 and black-and-white processing they do and adjust the processing schedule based on demand. If there are any future changes to film processing, we feel it will be gradual enough for labs to comfortably make any of the necessary adjustments.

Over the last few years we have heard a lot of speculation on where photography is going. When digital first came upon the scene, we heard many state that film would soon be a thing of the past and digital would take over by the year 2000. We no longer hear these crazy predictions, as the "old silver process" is still going strong. We know for sure that E-6 is alive and well at one special dive spot in Fiji!

Jack and Sue Drafahl own and operate a custom lab in Portland, OR. They are also professional photographers, specializing in underwater photography.