

SHARK RESEARCH INSTITUTE NEWSLETTER

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OPEN OCEAN SHARKS

They came at us from all sides. There was nothing frantic or menacing in their movements. They were self-assured, almost arrogant in their intuitive sense of power and superiority. As always, they were supremely graceful, even elegant. Their superb hydrodynamic design is the product of 350 million years of evolution and survival.

Not since we filmed the great oceanic whitetip sharks 100 miles to sea off Durban, South Africa, for the production of "Blue Water, White Death," had I encountered sharks in open ocean. With over 6,000 ft. of water under us and the low land of the Bahamas beyond sight over the horizon, there are no secure references. Psychologically there always seems to be protection on a reef; at least one side of you is not vulnerable. In open ocean you are very small and very out of your element. I believe the sharks with their primordial instincts are aware of that vulnerability. You know that they know that you know...so that an interesting and exciting ballet of the minds at two ends of the intelligence gamut is always happening.

The place was Tongue of the Ocean, a fearsomely deep trench that intrudes between the limestone plateaus that form New Providence and Andros Islands in the Bahamas. On both sides of this 6000ft-deep trench the walls drop in a vertical sheer. Years ago, when I was a dive guide in the Bahamas, working out of Nassau, I was the first person to explore the wall. That was in 1954. At that time I bounce dived to 200 ft along the wall, filled with dread for what I might encounter and always watching the dark blue depths below and outward from the wall for the approach of "monsters". So little was known about sharks at that time. We all had a deep-rooted fear of sharks. The changed attitude may be seen in the experience we were now having with a gathering of eight silky sharks in the Tongue of the Ocean.

My dive guides, the handsome blond divemaster, Christine Glorioso and her companion, divemaster Stephen McDiarmid, work as a team. Their dive activity is the newly developed Peter Hughes Dive Center at the Divi Bahamas Resort. From dockside to the great wall on the western end of Nassau is but a five minute run by boat. Twelve miles out toward Andros a tiny speck appears on the horizon. On approach it becomes a ponderous buoy, placed there by the U.S. Navy to mark a sophisticated sonar system between the surface and the ocean bottom 6000 ft below.

Before we could tie up to the buoy and suit up for the dive, the sharks were around the boat. They are now predictable, having

been fed often by divers. They respond to the arrival of the boat like Pavlov's dog to the dinner bell. It is reassuring to know that diving with them and feeding them has been accomplished innumerable times for Nassau divers without accident. Still, one must overcome every prudent instinct one has to step off the dive platform with a half-dozen sharks milling about just under the surface.

The water is oceanic clear and blue. There are no reference points and one is immediately aware that a current must be continually worked against to stay in the vicinity of the boat. At the same time the sharks, anticipating food, press upon the diver, demanding full attention. Stress on the ears is the first indication that one has drifted deeper without realizing it. The pressure gauge reads sixty feet. You are busy coping with the attentions of four sharks at once and have not noticed that you are separated from the others, and also deeper. A shot of adrenalin into your system accelerates the return to your companions. It becomes apparent that a prime concern is the adjustment of your buoyancy and care in keeping together.

The sharks average between four and six feet, handsome, classic sharks as the photographs show. Steve dispensed squid from a plastic bag held close to his body and out of sight. The activity of the sharks increased with the feeding until we were being bumped and shoved, and ever more frequently fending the sharks off with our cameras and hands. I watched one shark mouth the dome of Christine's camera. She took it in stride, checked the dome for scratches, and went on with her shooting. A giant bull dorado (dolphin fish) flashed into the arena, the biggest I had ever seen underwater. Vivid colors of gold and blue iridesced along his body in the excitement of the feeding. He mouthed my strobe, dislodging the diffuser which vanished into the depths.

We caught one another's eyes and with nods and gestures toward the boat, now an uncomfortable distance away, we started the hard push against the current to the boat. We were followed closely by the still-hungry banquet guests.

The experience, despite the unpredictability of the sharks, is what I call High Voltage. There may never be an accident in that scenario, which is now an almost routine exercise for experienced divers; but in the excitement of the feeding a misdirected bite could result in pain and severe damage to a diver. Some years back a famous Australian diver, Val Taylor, was bitten on the leg by a blue shark during the filming of that usually docile species. The feeding circumstance off the California coast was identical to our scene with the silky sharks. Val had to be evacuated by helicopter to undergo surgery hours later.

At other locations sharks are fed. In the Maldive Islands, at the Stella Maris resort in the Bahamas, off the wall at Little Cayman, and in the Caribbean sharks are fed adjacent to the reefs. Only at the Navy buoy in the Tongue of the Ocean have I encountered such a feeding process beyond the relative security of the reef. It is not for Sunday divers. It is, surely, a world class diving experience for seasoned divers with a desire for adventure and calculated risk.

... by Stan Waterman, SRI

GLOBAL SHARK ATTACK FILE

SAF CASE 406: At 11h30 on September 26, 1993, spearfisherman Wimpie Bouwer (36), was bitten by a 4-metre great white shark at Danger Point near Gansbaai, South Africa. No fish had been speared. "I had just surfaced for a rest when the shark hit me in the leg so hard I flew out of the water. It bit into my left leg at the same time," said Bouwer. Friends in a nearby skiboat came to his rescue and took the injured diver to shore. The shark made a single bite, and lacerated the diver's calf, but no tissue was removed. Two doctors who were on holiday in the area provided first aid. After a brief stabilization the diver was taken to Hermanus hospital for treatment. No tooth fragments were recovered from the wounds.

SAF CASE 405: On July 30, 1993, at 15h00, surfer Ralph Le Roux (28), was injured by a great white shark at Pollock Beach, Port Elizabeth, South Africa. Four other surfers were seaward of Le Roux, and reported that they saw "a shadow" swim below them and towards Le Roux immediately before the incident. Le Roux was lying on his board in water two metres deep deep, paddling into position, when he was attacked. "With the force of the attack I was thrown off my board," said the surfer. "On surfacing I had one look at the shark savaging my board and swam directly to the closest rocks [5 metres away] with the board in tow and still attached to the leash on my ankle."

The surfer sustained two picture wounds on his chest and his thumb was lacerated and broken. The shark, however, bit his 6'6" lime-green and yellow trifin surfboard six times. The diameter of the shark's jaw was 35 centimetres.

The incident occurred 10 minutes after mean high tide and inshore of a 3- to 4-metre-deep channel. The surfer believes the shark was initially after a seal that was on the rocks and became aggressive when he inadvertently moved into its path.

Both cases were reported by Andrew Gifford, who conducted in-depth interviews with the victims and witnesses.

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CAPTIVE BLUE SHARK

A blue shark, captured May 30, 1993, off the New Jersey coast, is on display at the state aquarium in Camden. The 760,000-gallon tank is the second largest in the nation and was specially designed to accommodate pelagic sharks; from corner to corner the dumbbell-shaped tank is about 120 feet in length and has few obstacles. Because the tank features species native to New Jersey the water temperature is kept about 65°F.

The shark, a 50-pound 5'6" female, was caught on hook and line, put on a stretcher and placed in a specially-designed fiberglass box. During the nine-hour journey to the aquarium the staff held the shark still to prevent injury and water was pumped into her gills. Despite extreme care during transport she sustained abrasions on her snout and back, but they are healing. In addition, she had bite marks -- possibly mating bites -- on

her lower caudal lobe. Divers placed the shark in the main tank immediately upon arrival in Camden. A week later she began eating; she consumes two pounds of squid, mackerel and flounder daily and appears to be thriving. This is the aquarium's second attempt to exhibit a blue shark; the first was caught last year, but it died after three days in captivity.

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FROM THE CAGE

SRI Board members, Maurice Coutts and Marie Levine, are also Fellows of the famed Explorers Club. On November 18th a meeting of the Philadelphia chapter of the Explorers Club will be held at the New Jersey State Aquarium in Camden, and Maurice and Marie will present videos and slides of their encounters with sharks.

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