

SHARK RESEARCH INSTITUTE NEWSLETTER

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REPORT ON COCOS '93

They came in rolling, leaping, joyous, exuberant, scattered and in independent formation. We could hear them. We could see the great cloud-capped green mass of Cocos Island rising above the horizon. They came from the island to meet us, no doubt impelled by memories of fluid dynamics and ecstatic rides on the bow wave of our ship. The sounds of our propellers, traveling on long waves at 6,200' per second, would have reached them almost before we could see the emerging island. We were a day and two nights out of Puntarenas, port town for Costa Rica, in the Okeanos Aggressor. This was my fourth trip to the fabled, isolated island, the legendary depository of the lost treasure of the Incas and home of a great resident school of hammerhead sharks, an embarrassment of whitetip reef sharks, marble rays, dense silver schools of tuna, jacks and other pelagics, and one of the established world class diving sites.

And Cocos Island did her reputation proud. All my old friends - if I may use that term for the legion of marine animals who probably wish the human visitors would get lost - were there. I embraced them and the superb weather we lucked out with. It was one of my Aggressor tours. A quorum of old friends and regulars were along. I always hope for good weather and plenty of action. Cocos can fall prey to that ill wind that blows no good. I don't mean the bagpipe. I refer to El Nino. Three years previously I had visited Cocos Island with Peter Benchley and a production team to shoot a piece for ESPN. El Nino rather did us in. The currents that race by the rock islands where we dive and that bring up nutrients to the surface, had subsided. The cold water, drawn up from the depths and that is also the source of the nutrient-rich broth, had moved far out and taken with it the schools of hammerheads. The water was a somnambulant 86 degrees. We worked hard, depended on some pretty slick editing and an unmentioned amount of stock footage to flesh out the hour.

No such problems this time around. The hammerheads favored us every day, swinging in close to the rocks to investigate the invaders. They favored us with the finest close-up takes of symbiotic cleaning action that I can recall. The hammerheads stall and allow the king angelfish to clean them. Our bunch got stills and videotape in clear water from distances as short as 15-20 feet. Some of us ventured out into the open blue water out of sight of the rocks and encountered the great schools of hammerheads. When you see them from below they appear as myriad squiggling amoeba or sperm in a glass.

While sharks are great favorites these days and it is even possible that most divers place seeing a shark at the top of

their hope, new divers and those who have not had experience with sharks carry with them the baggage of old, deeply-grounded fears. Thus the advent of their first encounter with "maneaters" is fraught with lurid and sensational impressions. In one day, indeed, in one dive, most become easy with the shark factor. The ubiquitous whitetip reef sharks are certain to banish the old fears. They are everywhere. They are in sight most of the time on every dive. They rest in the sand patches that terrace the rock walls, singles, duos, menage a trois, and gatherings by the dozens. My dive buddy, Martha Gilkes, and I encountered a shallow basin literally filled with them, probably 30 and more. We were diving on the seamount, called Alcyon. You may touch one if you approach very quietly from behind and hold your breath. If you make your first contact with the dorsal fin and gently stroke the back, some whitetips will assume you are a symbiotic associate and relax to the enjoyment of the stroking. 99% will take off before you reach them. Fear in the newcomers quickly gives way to pleasure in the encounters and the observation that it is the sharks that are shy. For the novice diver the sense of relief, adventure and anticipation of heroic tales for their neighbors when they reach home replaces the fear.

And there were other old friends, abundant and regular and always exciting. The mantas were there, not every day, but often enough to provide encounters for all the divers. They are the species mobilus, not as large as the great Pacific mantas. The ones at Cocos are about six to ten feet across on their wing span. The handsome marbled stingrays glided by or rested on the bottom and one day, when the water was colder and the currents stronger at Manulita Island a school of small tuna came crowding in from the blue, seemingly endless in their numbers, and circled the divers like eager sightseers. And one day also Martha and I found ourselves in a parade of paired jacks. Each pair was marked by a gray/white female on top and a black male in close attendance underneath. They looked like honeymooners on their way to the wedding chapel. It was certainly a mating ritual and one I had only observed with Nassau groupers years ago in the waters off Belize. There some percentage of the females were hermaphroditically transformed. Here, as we watched, the newly-weds swam by in ordered pairs.

On the last day on the last dive we returned to Manulita where we had some of the finest action during the week. Martha and I and the group in Zodiac #1 elected to take the western course around the island. The divers in Zodiac #2 headed in the other direction around the eastern or outside end. And on that last dive, so strangely typical of the unforeseen adventure that may ride on a simple decision about which way you are going to swim, the Zodiac #2 group had the much-hoped-for encounter with a whale shark. We all shared in their splendid encounter as we crowded into the salon of the Okeanos Aggressor to watch two different videos of the adventure, which doesn't mean that the green vapors of envy didn't hang upon those of us who had gone to the west.

So you will gather that the marine environment of Cocos Island is healthy and vigorous. I am not sure that for encounters with a variety of big pelagic animals and especially with sharks

and rays together there is any equal to Cocos Island. Given the dependable comfort of the Okeanos Aggressor with a crackerjack thoughtful and efficient crew, cooking that would make a gourmet sob aloud and an excellent wine stock that would please an oeniphyle, Cocos Island remains one of the great diving adventures of our time.

...Stan Waterman, SRI

FEEDING SHARKS: THE DAMN THINGS BITE!

Recently, Tobago's Secretary of Marine Affairs ordered dive operators to stop feeding sharks for the diving tourists. The order came in response to a tourist who had complained that the "feeding was crazy and most dangerous."

So far as we know, tourists observing shark feeds aren't in much danger. But guides who feed the critters are often fair game. In the past few months, guides from three dive operations in the Bahamas offering shark dives have been bitten. While none of the attacks has been fatal, one victim flew to Miami for additional medical evaluation.

Guides at Dive Dive Dive, Stuart's Cove in Nassau and UNEXSO of Grand Bahamas were bitten, but only Dive, Dive, Dive has stopped offering the shark dives. Ray Post told us, "we are looking closely at our procedures and when we feel comfortable we will offer it again."

Shark dives began in the Bahamas at Stella Maris Inn on Long Island more than 15 years ago. Joel Friese of Stella Maris told us, "we have never had anyone bitten by a shark in all the time we have offered it. At least one shark dive is offered as part of our standard dive package and everyone seems to enjoy it."

But, everyone is not so lucky. Stuart Cove, who himself got bit, told us that in each case it was the guide's own fault. "We were showing off and didn't follow our usual practices. When I got bit, I was with a group from National Geographic. I wanted them to get some heavy feeding activity pictures; so, I did some things that I should not have done. It is as simple as that."

Stuart needed 20 stitches. "David Eads got the other bite," Stuart told us. "He was waving the bait around on a stick making the sharks do tricks. He had to have forty stitches in his hand. Since then we either just open the bait box on the bottom and let the sharks help themselves or, if we use the bait on a stick, we wear chain mail gloves that reach to the shoulder."

Cove said he has never had a visitor hurt and there is a great demand for their \$75 shark dive.

John Englander says that UNEXSO has had three incidents. One guide hit a shark's tooth with his hand; another had one small puncture wound; and the third was more seriously injured, with considerable damage to the muscles in the arm.

UNEXSO has been hand feeding sharks for about five years. They enclose the food in a large PVC tube that is sealed off to prevent the scent of the food from creating a feeding frenzy. They have three to five safety divers present to cover the feeders' flanks. In all three cases, John said, "I think that the sharks just missed the food and hit the feeder. We are looking

into chain mail gloves, but right now, we do not have them."

Englander said that UNEXSO has a special waiver their customers must sign that, in effect, says that "they realize that we cannot and do not guarantee their lives if they go on the shark dive.

The funny part is the more we mention the danger, the more people want to do the dive. It's very strange."

...Ben Davison, Undercurrent

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GLOBAL SHARK ATTACK FILE

On June 9, 1993, scuba diver John Ford (31) was fatally injured by a 16-foot great white shark at Byron Bay, Australia. The wetsuit-clad diver and his wife were ten feet below the surface when the shark charged. Portions of the victim's body were recovered.

On June 4, 1993, scuba diver Therese Cartwright (35) was fatally attacked by a 12-foot great white shark on the northern coast of Tasmania. Cartwright was on the surface when the shark attacked; the two divers who entered the water with her had submerged and witnessed the attack.

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NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTIONS WELCOMED

SRI encourages submissions by readers on any topic related to the behavior, biology, conservation or ecology of sharks. All materials are subject to editorial review. Forward submissions to SRI Newsletter, PO Box 40, Princeton, NJ 08540.

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