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 Appeared in Diver August 2004

The Shark's Last Stand



As Open Water promises to make a new generation of movie-goers tremble, it's increasingly clear that sharks are in sore need of better PR. But is it already too late? **John Bantin** and **Monty Halls** assess the extent of the threat to sharks - and explain how divers can make the difference.

The only good shark's a dead one! Let's get real. That's the common public perception. Movies are made by the dozen to reinforce this idea. ??? It started long before Steven Spielberg first put eye to viewfinder to film *Jaws*. Peter Benchley had already written the best-selling novel, the idea based around the account of a lone shark terrorising the beaches and rivers of Long Island and New Jersey in 1916. ??? Those people dragged from the water way back then met disbelief when they said that a shark had attacked them - even those for whom these were their dying words! Sharks had no reputation for attacking people in 1916. Read the full story in *Close To Shore* by Michael Capuzzo. ??? What a turnaround since then for the unfortunate shark. Members of the armed forces who found themselves unexpectedly in the sea during World War Two were often reported as being killed by sharks. ??? They were of course already severely burned or injured or even just plain drowning, and the sharks were simply doing what they were designed to do - keeping the ocean clean. Since then, we have had a



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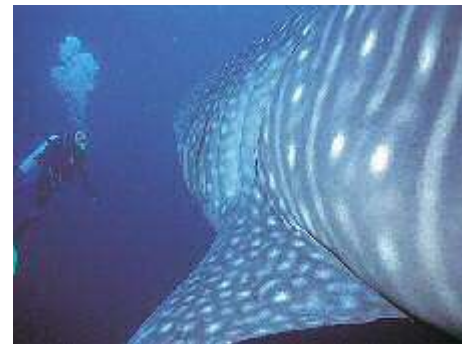
diet of movies such as Deep Blue Sea, where a rogue mako shark actually jumps out of a pool to grab Samuel L Jackson for a snack.
 ??? The latest film in a diet of death-by-denizen-of-the-deep, Open Water, is a fictional account of what happened in real life to the Lonergans, the couple left behind by their boat while diving outside the Great Barrier Reef.
 ??? As Peter Benchley, now an active voice for the preservation of sharks, told me: "Sharks make the perfect villain for a horror movie. Few people know anything about them. You can be scared to death in the cinema but sleep soundly at home in the knowledge that no shark will climb the stairs to get you."
 ??? He also reflected that the most memorable headline ever to appear in Australian newspapers was along the lines of "Mother of Four Eaten By Shark".

We know now that ours is a "blue planet" and that most of its life-forms live in the oceans, but few people realise the essential role played by sharks in the health of those oceans, and of Planet Earth.
 ??? You will never see dead or dying fish, or fish suffering from epidemics of disease, where a healthy shark population is present.
 ??? The shark's job is to weed out the weaklings, the ill and the infirm and it is designed for that job. Its mouth carries such powerful bacteria that it can overwhelm almost any bacterium in anything it eats.
 ??? A shark never gets sick and nor does its environment, so where there are sharks you know you are diving a healthy underwater world.
 ??? But it is a world in peril. More than 100 million sharks are slaughtered every year for their fins alone. Dried shark-fin fetches more than US \$400 per kg in the markets of southern Asia - so much that the trade has attracted the involvement of Chinese Triad gangs.
 ??? The existence of sharks as viable species is under threat, and with it the whole underwater world.
 ??? Sharks in some of the world's greatest dive locations are under threat. In the Galapagos Islands in the Pacific, direct-action conservationists Sea Shepherd report that Ecuadorian fishermen have rioted in protest and tried to destroy the Darwin Research Station because they want to sell shark-fins, along with sea cucumbers fished from the precious marine reserve, to meet burgeoning demand in China.
 ??? Cocos Island, part of Costa Rica, is also a marine reserve, famous for its vast populations of scalloped hammerhead and whitetip reef sharks. But it is policed from scant resources, much of which have been donated, and the sharks must run the gauntlet of the long-line fleets that operate at its fringes.
 ??? Bikini Atoll was famous for its healthy population of grey reef sharks until it was given too much publicity, probably in diving magazines such as this. The Taiwanese long-line fleets moved in from elsewhere in the Marshall Islands and now only a few surviving sharks patrol the reefs and channels.

Even the mighty yet harmless whale shark, the biggest fish in the sea, has been subjected to



Severed head of a hammerhead and other unwanted shark parts on a beach on a Red Sea island



Among species under threat is the mighty whale shark- this one is in the Galapagos.



Long line recovered by divers at Cocos

The Bahamas Experience



Shark-feeding in the Bahamas brings the

slaughter by a fishery in southern India as animals pass in an anti-clockwise migratory pattern around the Indian Ocean.

???? News magazine *The Week* reported in May that the Chinese economy is expanding so fast that it is responsible for a third of global economic growth. At an amazing 8% per year, it is fuelling an unprecedented boom in consumption of consumer goods within China. It has become the second largest importer of oil after the USA and, of course, it earns foreign currency from a boom in cheap exports.

???? If an increasingly prosperous country of 1.3 billion people wants shark-fin soup, it's not difficult to see how beleaguered the governments of small island nations with an eye to conservation can become. They are simply outbid on price in the demand for sharks.

???? Early this year, a patrol boat from the tiny Pacific nation of Palau captured a fishing boat, the Taiwanese Sheng Chi Hui No7, illegally long-lining for sharks in territorial waters near the island of Anguar. Palau is famous in the diving world for shark action at sites such as Blue Corner.

???? Minister of Justice Michael Rosenthal told me that although all the members of the government were agreed about the seizure of the boat and confiscation of its cargo, many wanted to sell the cargo and add the money raised to state coffers.

???? President Remengesau, a staunch environmentalist, insisted on burning the fins publicly. "Our message is very clear today," he said. "We will not tolerate shark-fishing in the waters of Palau." It was an impressive, if expensive, gesture. The maximum fine imposed was a puny US \$13,000, while the harvest of fins would have been worth a staggering US \$290,000 in the markets of Hong Kong.

In French Polynesia, another area in which shark-feeding by divers is almost routine, and further from Asia than the islands of Micronesia and Melanesia, the sharks have so far escaped the attentions of long-line fleets, but for how long?

???? Pascal Jagut of Blue Dolphin Dive Centre in Rangiroa told me that divers visited the Tuomoto Islands only for the sharks, and without sharks there would be no diving industry.

???? Nearer to home, in the Egyptian Red Sea, Amr Ali, the current chairman of HEPCA (Hurgada Environmental Protection and Conservation Agency), seemed unaware of the market value of shark-fin. But he said that although HEPCA was still concentrating on installing dive-boat moorings, a new threat to the unique Red Sea environment was that from the Nile fishing fleet threatening to move its zone of operations.

???? He told Diver that the fleet employed methods that included illegal nets and techniques. Neither was the necessary legislation in place to help. For example, he told me, a HEPCA patrol had arrested a fishing boat with the corpses of 16 hammerhead sharks on board but was unable to prove that they had been taken from one of the existing marine parks. "We are making only painful progress," he said.

Caribbean reef sharks up close. This is Stuart Cove's in New Providence

There is still one small area of the world in which a live shark is worth a lot more than a dead one. Most of those "deadly" sharks in the movies live in the one place where they are protected.

The Bahamas have been a magnet for underwater movie-makers since a silent version of *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea* was made there 100 years ago. You too can pay to dive with these sharks and enjoy a close encounter of a kind you rarely experience anywhere else.

It's not cheap. US \$120 for two dives, each lasting, say, 35 minutes, sounds staggeringly expensive, but if you want to see lots of sharks so close that they might accidentally bump into you, there's nothing to beat it.

These are mainly Caribbean reef sharks. The males are similar to grey reef sharks of the Indo-Pacific region but the females tend to be a lot larger and bulkier. And it is the mighty price tag for the diving that has made them so valuable.

Why are Bahamas sharks less skittish among scuba-divers than they are in many other parts of the world?

Many of the dive centres stage shark feeds. At Small Hope Bay in Andros, dive-guides suspend a pre-frozen bucket of fish scraps between a buoy and an anchoring point. The sharks swim around feeding as the scraps defrost.

They do a similar thing but on a larger scale, using a barrel, at Walkers Cay in the Abacos. Divers can either swim with the sharks, taking care not to appear to compete for the food, or watch from a distance. Most prefer the second option. The same technique is used by crews of liveboards such as AquaCat in the Exumas Marine Park.

Dive operations such as Stuart Cove's and Nassau Scuba Centre, based on the island of New Providence, gather their divers in a semi-circle on the seabed while they feed the sharks fish-scraps from a box with the aid of a spear.

The feeder wears chain-mail to protect against accidental bites. No paying guest has ever been injured.

The spin-off is that you are likely to see sharks quite close on other routine dives in the Bahamas, whereas at other locations in the world, shark encounters tend to be fleeting.

Each Bahamas shark is said to generate around US \$250,000 of tourist revenue during its lifetime. So far, even the Chinese shark-fin soup-eaters are not prepared to pay that much.

That's what's keeping the sharks in the Bahamas safe - for the time being.

We still know so little about sharks.

Adoptashark.com is the visible end of a shark-tracking project based in the Sea of Cortez, Mexico, using rebreather divers to fit electronic satellite tags to scalloped hammerhead sharks. This, it is hoped, will succeed in revealing migratory patterns, aggregating sites and pupping grounds. ??? This information is intended for the recommended placement of sanctuaries that can be protected from fishing. However, the tags can cost upwards of US \$4000 each, and what long-line fisherman will do with the tagged animals they might catch, or indeed the tag itself, remains to be seen. ??? Sharks take years to mature., and having few young are particularly vulnerable to over-fishing. Shark-fin provides gelatinous bulk in soup but is tasteless - the soup has to be flavoured with chicken stock. Yet a Hong Kong diner will pay US \$150 for a bowl of the stuff in a restaurant. ??? Economic pressure to render this apex predator extinct is intense. We have to make sharks valuable - not vulnerable.

This is where you come in

There are as many as 250,000 divers in the UK, most of whom at some point have climbed back onto a boat babbling with excitement at the appearance of that thrilling shadow at the edge of the reef. You are uniquely placed to view the decline in shark species throughout the world, and to reap the rewards of halting that decline. By making your feelings known you may just be the generation that not only almost destroyed the shark, but saved it as well.

TAKE DIRECT ACTION

Does your local Chinese restaurant sell shark-fin soup? It is well worth (politely!) pointing out the rising groundswell against this dish in the UK - you may be ignored, but a quiet word with diving friends could result in the restaurant-owners hearing these comments again and again, and a small blow may be struck. If no notice is taken, eat elsewhere. The same goes for supermarkets that sell shark - and if you really want to get direct, you could always spend time outside the shop filling in its customers. And without boring them, make sure your non-diving friends know the score.

CAMPAIGN BY EMAIL

After global email campaigns saw Singapore Airlines and Thai Airways take shark-fin soup off their menus, Bite-Back (bite-back.com/news) is using the power of email to lobby supermarkets to stop selling threatened fish. Marlin, orange roughy, monkfish and swordfish as well as shark are on its list. Bite-Back provides leaflets that can be downloaded from its site to be presented to supermarkets and restaurants. A notable success recently was the withdrawal of the Wagamama chain of noodle bars in the UK from serving shark. Bite-Back also runs other shark-related projects.

FUND A PR CAMPAIGN

Wild Aid (www.wildaid.org/programs/shark.htm) is a well-administered, effective organisation that concentrates on raising awareness of finning issues

Rays of hope

It's not all gloom and doom. There is an awareness at the highest levels of government of the impact of finning (defined, incidentally, as the removal of the sharks fins without keeping the remaining carcass).



Hammerhead sharks at Cocos island in the Pacific.

- A report to the House of Representatives in the USA in 1999 noted that banning finning practices in any one area could reduce shark mortality by 85% in that same area (the remaining 15% are deaths through by-catch and intentional fishing for species such as mako and the thresher). 4 PR campaigns have had an impact on the consumption of soup. The oldest shark-fin soup restaurant chain in Hong Kong recently closed, and cited environmental lobbying as a main reason. Shark-fin soup consumption is down by 25% in Singapore and 30% in Taiwan.
- Certain species are proving highly resilient, including the mako, which appears to range far and deep enough to avoid the worst impact of the long-liners.
- Natural surges in populations are still taking place in small pockets globally, a notable example being the dramatic rise in salmon shark populations off Alaska.
- The NOAA (National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration) in the USA recently reported that blue-shark populations in the Pacific were, at least for the time being, healthy.
- A raft of smaller organisations have sprung up in an effort to protect the shark, both locally and internationally. These organisations co-ordinate the

through orchestrated PR campaigns. As well as using advertising by J Walter Thompson, producing Chinese-language documentaries and hosting press conferences, it has used random testing to reveal excessive levels of the toxin mercury in shark fins (yes, sharks can be damage your health). The New York Times called WildAid's approach "aggressive but economically comprehensive". Peter Benchley, writer of *Jaws*, said: "Never have so few dedicated people accomplished so much for so many with such limited resources." WildAid relies on donations, and its website allows for them to be made on-line for the shark campaign.

BECOME A VOLUNTEER

The Shark Trust (www.sharktrust.org) is a UK voluntary body dealing with the study, management and conservation of sharks and rays. It aims to raise awareness of shark-conservation issues and assist established research programmes in their work. The trust contributed to securing CITES (global protection) listing for the whale shark and basking shark in November 2002, and in 2001 initiated the campaign for banning finning in EU waters and on EU vessels worldwide. It has also created websites monitoring whale shark and basking shark movements and identification worldwide.

BOTHER YOUR MEP

Go to www.europarl.org.uk/index.htm to find out who your MEP is (few people know or can remember) and make your feelings known by email. It's a drop in the ocean but you're raising the issue. After the recent elections, a whole raft of new MEPs are anxious to make their mark, so now is as good a time as any.

JOIN AN EXPEDITION

Operation Red Fin (01747 854 898, base@ses-explore.org) is a project aiming to sail around the world for 18 months, departing from the UK in late 2005. Stopping at 12 shark hotspots, the mission is to raise awareness of shark issues, lobby local government, conduct tagging programmes and help establish baseline data about local shark populations. The expedition starts in the UK and visits South Africa, Mozambique, the Red Sea, the Maldives, Western Australia, Palau, Bikini, Hawaii, the Sea of Cortez, the Galapagos and the Bahamas.

various campaigns that are taking place and raise awareness of the problems facing the shark. They do make a difference, with some high-profile campaigns that have taken place over the past few years reaping real rewards. And this is where divers can be most effective.

Other friends of the shark



Adoptashark, www.adoptashark.com

Basking Shark Project, www.isle-of-man.com/interests/shark

Mediterranean Shark, www.zoo.co.uk/~z9015043

Pelagic Shark Research Foundation, www.pelagic.org

Save Our Sharks (which encourages Malaysian and Singaporean schoolchildren to nag parents, friends and neighbours who eat sharkfin soup),

www.oceanNEnvironment.com.au/sharks.htm

Shark Bay, whc.unesco.org/sites/578.htm

Shark Foundation, www.shark.ch

Shark Myths, www.marinelab.sarasota.fl.us

Shark Research Institute, www.sharks.org

Sea Shepherd, www.seashepherd.org

What the experts say

Our generation has harvested sharks from the ocean on an industrial scale and all the evidence, from the musings of bewildered dive operators over a cold beer through to dry scientific studies show that certain species are in freefall.

The shark is in real trouble - and millions of years of evolution and tweaks in design are no use to it, so help has to come from elsewhere.

There is hardly a diver who hasn't heard the tales of woe from his or her favourite dive operator overseas, but let's survey the hard numbers.

Several years ago, Julia Baum of Halifax

University in Nova Scotia was tasked to examine fisheries records for various large shark species in the North Atlantic. Her subsequent report, published in Science in 2002, revealed precipitous declines in most large species. Her study area was vast, from Newfoundland to northern Brazil, and included both inshore and deep waters. Most affected were the large species, with an average drop of 61% in overall population numbers.

When broken down into individual species, the report turns into an environmental horror story. Blue sharks, one of the species most resistant to overfishing because of their wide range and relatively high reproduction rate, had dropped in numbers by 60%. Tiger shark populations had decreased by 65%, great whites by 79%, threshers by 80%, hammerheads by 89% and silky sharks by 90%.

The real catastrophe lay with one of the most impressive species. The oceanic whitetip, a powerful, graceful open-ocean shark once thought to be one of the most abundant large animals on earth, had experienced a 99% drop in numbers in the past 50 years.

"The situation is akin to the herds of buffalo disappearing from the Great Plains, except this time no-one noticed," says Ransom Myers, also responsible for collecting the data in the study.

The situation in the Pacific is less clear, though anecdotal evidence is very strong for a similarly precipitous decline in shark numbers. Specific studies are hard to find but evidence from fishing fleets speaks volumes for the increased pressure on shark populations.

From 1991 through to 1998, the number of sharks killed in the Central and Western Pacific Ocean Fisheries rose by 2,500%, with 98.7% of these animals caught for their fins. Canada, the USA, New Zealand and Australia have already outlawed finning, but a similar proposal was not fully passed in the European Union when first presented, despite enthusiastic lobbying.

Legislation was passed by the EU in 2003, but is described as toothless and impossible to regulate by most conservation bodies.

This is a key issue - shark-finning is still taking place on our doorstep. Spain exported 21 metric tonnes of shark fins to Singapore in 1998 and 1999. The UK exported 3 metric tons that year, and this is only the official figure. Tales are rife of unofficial direct transactions between boats and agents overseas.



Simply picking a juvenile grey reef shark out of the water at Bikini Atoll probably causes it fatal damage

European nets and lines spread far and wide - 1300 European fishing vessels, including some of the largest built and run by the Dutch, pay a levy to fish off developing countries.

As noble conservation projects spring up everywhere, backed by public opinion, the shark seems to have slipped under the radar. Telling non-believers "they are beautiful" doesn't work. Here are some more pressing arguments:

- Dr James F Kitchell of the University of Wisconsin specialises in the role of predators in ecosystems. He notes: "Like the axe and plough, the hook and net can create major changes in ecological structure and function. We've been fishing the top off the food web."
- Data-collector Ransom Myers notes: "Pervasive overfishing of these species may initiate major ecological changes."
- Dr Robert Heuter of the Mote Marine Laboratory in Florida says: "This is not a giant laboratory, we are playing with the future of our marine food resources. Sharks are adapted to be the predators, not the prey. If we take them to the brink, then decide that we don't like what's happened, that'll be too bad. It'll be impossible to bring them back quickly."

So we could be looking at major changes in the oceans' "food web" - changes that will affect fisheries and communities established over centuries to fish in certain areas and for particular species. The economic and social impacts could be great, as 200 million people are estimated to be employed globally by

commercial fisheries, and 500 million draw their What's certain is that we are fishing out shark stocks, we have no idea of the long-term effects on the oceans - and this matter will be resolved one way or the other in the next decade.

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