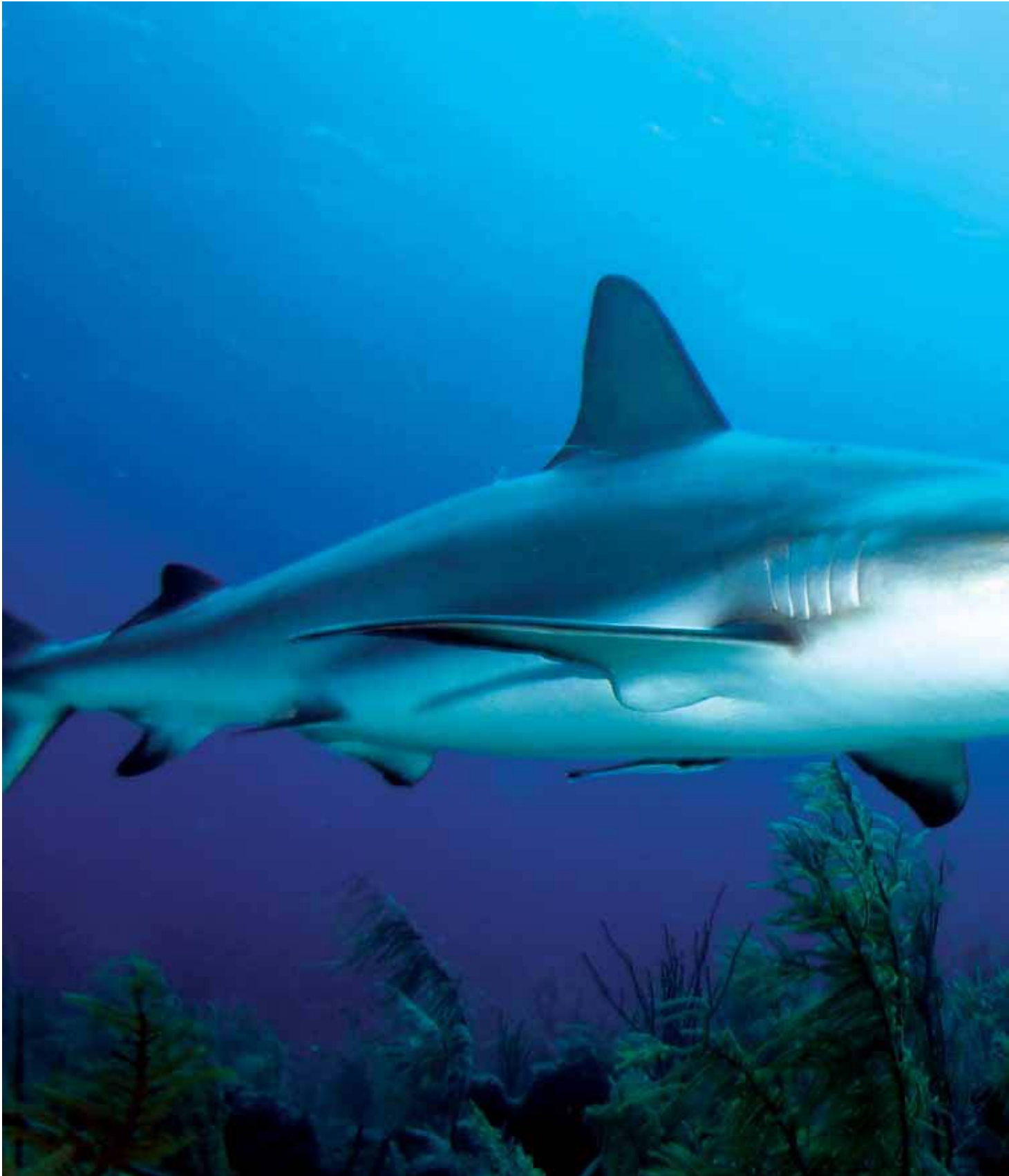


Shark feeder

By Christopher Bartlett



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Ever since I started diving, I've been an elasmobranch fan. On my open water qualifying dives I saw sand tigers every dive. On my deep dive for my advanced Open Water I apparently shared it with 12 mantas and swam with a whale shark on the way back. I say apparently as I was incapable of counting them, I just stared in awe at them as they cruised around me for 20 minutes. Then I moved to South Africa, became a DM on Aliwal Shoal, and enjoyed hundreds of sand tiger encounters and did half a dozen baited tiger shark dives.



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Many people are scared witless by sharks, but I love them. I scuba dive and free dive with them whenever I can. I was offered an opportunity to take my passion to the next level, on a Shark Feeder course in the Bahamas run by the legendary 'shark wrangler', Stuart Cove.

The dive centre looks more like a small village, and fifty-odd employees in bright pink t-shirts keep a flow of customers moving through the registration, gear fitting, kit up and departure processes. It is a well-oiled machine run by an experienced team and an impressive sight to see. As soon as I had signed the usual pre-dive paperwork and some rather lengthier tomes due to the additional risks involved in giving bait to sharks, I was introduced to two of Stuart's most experienced shark feeders and instructors, Chang and Ryan.

Before the underwater fun could begin, there was a morning of classroom preparation. After taking me through a Shark Awareness Speciality Course, covering species ID as well as polite and aggressive behaviour, we talked about Caribbean reef shark predation habits, movement, and looked at shark body language; basically how to spot an aggressive or agitated shark and what to do about it.

In the afternoon, I was to observe and shoot Stuart Cove's two-dive "Shark Adventure" on a wreck called the Edwin Williams. On the first dive we swam over the ship to get our bearings and then circled around the site, with some large sharks joining us and then swimming off.

After a 30 minute surface interval, Chang, the shark feeder, started kitting up with a suit of chainmail and Neptunic helmet, and began his in-depth briefing. Carrying more weights than normal, we would



be placed around the rails on the stern by his assistant who would also be the cameraman for the dive, and could either stand or kneel at our station and observe the feed, keeping our cameras and arms close to our bodies. I was given free rein to move around the deck and

had a set of chainmail arms on.

Once we were in position, Chang came down to join us, looking like a cross between a downhill skier and a medieval knight scuba diving. Weighted down by a steel box containing carcasses of dead grouper and lionfish, he dropped into the

middle of the deck, like an underwater rocketman landing. I looked around and counted around close to a dozen sharks in or around the aft deck, most of them close to 3m in length.

Chang started his show, slipping a piece of carcass onto a metal rod and slowly waving up and down until one of the larger sharks cruised in, gaped wide open, and took the snack. And it really is a snack. A 2010 study into the effects of 'shark provisioning' in Nassau on Caribbean reef sharks (*Carcharhinus perezi*) by Aleksandra Maljkovich of Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada showed that the fish given to the sharks went essentially to the largest sharks and even then it calculated that the nutritional value of the fish eaten by the sharks was nowhere near enough to constitute their sole food source.

As Chang moved round the deck, each diver got a close-up experience with several 3m sharks, and an opportunity to get a shot of them taking the bait right in front of them. The sharks would occasionally bump my strobes out of position in their eagerness to get to the fish, so I had to move my hands and arms around. At one point this happened as a piece of fish came off the



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feeding stick. I hadn't seen it floating towards me, but a couple of the sharks had and zoomed in. I was looking through the viewfinder still, my left arm outstretched to realign a strobe, when I felt the slightest pressure on it. I looked left instantly and saw a 2.5m reefie with my bicep in its mouth. In a second it realised its mistake and let go. Still, I was glad I had the chainmail suit on.

Once everyone had had a good eyeful, Chang closed

the bait box, extended a hand to a passing shark, and began rubbing its snout. Stimulating the shark's ampullae of Lorenzini with the chainmail glove, the shark stopped moving completely. In a state called 'tonic immobility' the shark looked like it was in a blissful state, like having an itchy spot on your back scratched. He put his other hand on its dorsal fin and moved it around, rotating 360 degrees to show it to the group. When

he stopped rubbing, the shark took a few moments to come out of its trance-like state before swimming off. Incredible.

He fed the last pieces of fish to the sharks as we all ascended to the boat, keeping them busy whilst we got out of the water. Looking around, there was not one person who did not have a huge, shark-like grin on their face.

On the second morning, we had a debrief in the classroom, and then looked at the mechanics of the shark feeding movement; how to get the bait on, how to attract the sharks to it and how to give the guests the best experience.

That afternoon I went out on the Shark Adventure with Ryan, listened to his briefing very carefully, and observed him even more closely. On the first dive we headed out to Shark Arena, an area of open sand with large stones placed in a circle in it. We swam over the site, past a wreck, and over the reef wall. Within a few minutes inquisitive Caribbean reef sharks appeared, following

us along the wall. Circling back, and approaching the arena from the other direction, close to a dozen were milling around the general vicinity.

45 minutes later, back in a shark suit, I was in the middle of the arena with my camera and had the best seat in the house. There were nearly three times as many sharks compared to the Edwin Williams, although many were smaller, 2m specimens. They seemed a little more frisky than the day before, but I was absorbed and loving being in the middle of so many beautiful big fish. They would swim out of the arena before circling back round, and were coming in from all angles. It was pretty intense and I found myself giggling into my regulator.

24 hours later, I was giving the briefing under Ryan's supervision. Today I was going to feed with him. "Do they ever go a bit crazy?" had been one of my questions. "You just gotta treat them like playful dogs sometimes," he'd replied. Except they are 75 to 100kg, 3m long puppies. With a lot more teeth. Underwater in their element.

We dropped in together, the weight of the chainmail and the bait box requiring a decent amount of air in my BCD. There were 30+ sharks again, looking pretty playful I thought. Ryan got the ball rolling and then handed the feeding stick over to me. I looked around, found a big shark coming from the edge of the circle, speared a snack, and waved it slowly



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towards the photographer. Wave it too fast and the bait comes off and a minor free-for-all starts, go too slow and the sharks don't see it. In she came. Her nictating membrane closed, as it often does when a shark is about to use its mouth, and then her jaws where around the stick and I slid it away. Ryan gave me the big 'okay' sign and a pat on the back. Easy as that.

As we continued the feed, a couple of bits fell off and the sharks started to get a bit feisty. Ryan was barely a metre away and at times I could no longer see him, the sea was thick with sharks. I got a tail swipe to the head and realised that the helmets were not just for show. Then another tail swipe or passing pectoral fin pulled my reg out of my mouth. It seemed like playful dog time was upon us.

I asked whether I should pause the feed. Ryan agreed and I clipped the heavy box shut. Following Ryan's lead, I placed my hands on the flank of a passing shark and shoved it sideways. We were back-to-back, clearing space around the bait box, and it did remind me of training my German shepherd. Sort of. Rather than agitate them, it seemed to calm them down, and after 60 seconds or so, things were back to normal.

So I could feed them, but could I put them into tonic immobility? Again, Ryan led the way, and I copied him, placing my hand palm down on a passing shark's head, sliding it to the snout, and wiggling my fingers inches from its mouth. "The bigger they are, the faster you have to wiggle," he'd said in the classroom. I'd picked a medium-sized one, about 2m long, but I was wiggling and tickling as fast as I could. And then the shark stopped moving. I put it on the sand and knelt down, rubbing its nose and stroking its back. If I hadn't had to keep my reg in, my mouth would've dropped open and my



jaw would have hit the sand.

It's quite an emotional experience. Not at all the 'man tames shark' testosterone buzz you might expect, more like getting ready to invite the most gorgeous girl in the office out for a drink, and then fast forwarding to the Zen of stroking her hair whilst you chill on the sofa having discovered

you have the same taste in music as she sings your praises. There is a definite love at first sight feeling, except it happens every time with every shark, coupled with a weird combination of inner peace and astonishment. It's better than drugs, and unsurprisingly, I didn't want to stop, but there were customers to entertain.

I had some fun at the end, getting them as close to the cameraman as possible, but all too soon I was down to the last morsel. I picked out a little shark with a fish hook stuck in its mouth, gave him his sharky snack, and said a silent thank you and goodbye to them. It was truly a wonderful experience, and looking back on it, it is still very difficult to accurately describe my emotions; the best I can do is 'fintastic!'

SHARK FEEDING AND BAITED DIVES - FOR OR AGAINST?

Shark feeding - or 'provisioning' as the scientists call it - and baited shark dives are the subject of considerable debate amongst divers. The main point of contention being that it is not natural and alters sharks' behaviour. In the specific case of the feeding that takes place off Nassau, a peer-reviewed paper published in a scientific journal states that there is no negative effect in this case. The full paper can be found at www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0006320710004908

In other areas where I have been on fed or baited dives, at Aliwal Shoal in South Africa, Andros Island and Tiger Beach in the Bahamas, and in the Turks and Caicos, in most cases, the TCI being the exception, I believe natural behaviours have been changed. However, I personally consider that these changes are not harmful to the sharks, and the benefits of allowing divers to observe them at close quarters outweigh any potential negatives. A study into the black-tip sharks residing off the southern end of Aliwal Shoal has started and will enable greater understanding of their behaviour.

For more information on shark diving in the Bahamas, contact Indigo Safaris at info@indigosafaris.com or visit www.indigosafaris.com 