

Shark Feeding Debate Continues in Florida

Dive industry fares opposition

As we reported last October, Florida's Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC) proposed last February to ban dive operators from feeding sharks, citing a range of environmental concerns and potentially more shark attacks on unsuspecting people.

Their action sparked a hot debate and heavy involvement by dive industry interests that wanted to protect the economic value of shark feeding. What better way to attract divers!

Subsequently, in September, the Commission ignored its own previous, unanimous recommendation. Instead, it didn't approve the ban, but urged the factions to work together to recommend responsible conduct of organized marine feedings.

At the May Commission meetings, the dive industry put forward guidelines produced by the Global Interactive Marine Experiences Council (GIMEC), an entity formed by Florida marine feeding interests and others. GIMEC has the stated purpose to assist in marine life conservation efforts and to provide a process for the development and distribution of recommended guidelines and best management practices for marine life interactive experiences.

GIMEC reportedly developed its guidelines in consultation with dive operators, operator associations, environmentalists, marine biologists and shark behavior experts, several of whom now serve on GIMEC's Florida Board of Directors and Advisory Board. Absent were any members of the faction that supports a ban. The recommendations were purport-

ed to provide basic recommended content, techniques, and procedures for conducting safe and enjoyable marine life interactive experiences, and can be viewed at: www.scubadiving.com/GIMEC.

Undercurrent tried to learn more about GIMEC's structure, function and goals, from contact John Stewart, the director of marketing for the Dive Equipment and Marketing Association (DEMA), the organizing force behind the anti-ban effort. Stewart refused to be interviewed, he told us, because we printed such a horrible distortion of the industry side of the argument in our October article. (Judge for yourself: you can find the story at www.undercurrent.org. Click on "recent issues" in the banner and go to October 2000.)

In any event, the FWCC was less than impressed with GIMEC's efforts. Concerned that these recommendations did not adequately protect marine resources or the diving public,

the FWCC directed state biologists and other staff to review and refine the proposed guidelines. In particular, the Commission asked that issues of species being fed, distance from beaches and natural reefs where feeding occurs, and whether the touching or handling of marine life should be permitted, are addressed. These guidelines should be available in late August. They will be open for public comment in early September at the next Commission meeting.

Meanwhile, divers can submit their written comments to the FWCC at: www.marine@gfc.state.fl.us. Copies may be forwarded to the Marine Safety Group at: bob.dimond@marinesafetygroup.com and the GIMEC comments board provided by Rodale's Scuba Diving (www.scubadiving.com/GIMEC/forum/index.shtml).

The FWCC action is not the only effort to control organized marine feedings in Florida. Anti-feeding proponents have asked many cities to ban the practice in their local

A Cousteau Shark Slaughter

Just a generation ago, Jacques Cousteau wrote that his ship, *Calypso*, accidentally ran over a newborn sperm whale. The creature was horribly sliced by *Calypso's* twin propellers. The water turned crimson. Cousteau's crew ended the suffering with a rifle shot to the brain. More than 20 sharks moved in to feed, which today we would consider perfectly understandable scavenging behavior. But Cousteau, the most renowned naturalist of his time, felt his stomach turn.

In his book, *The Living Sea*, he wrote: "On deck our men had watched them devouring the whale and were overcome with the hatred of sharks that lies so close under the skin of a sailor. When we finished filming, the crew ran around grabbing anything with which they could punish a shark — crowbars, fire axes, gaffs, and tuna hooks — and they got down onto the diving platform to thrust, knock, slash and hook sharks. They hauled flipping sharks onto the deck in a production line and finished them off."

What changed our view? The popularity of scuba diving. Scientists and recreational divers eventually came to understand the shark in its own realm.

— John Balzar, *Los Angeles Times*

Pavlov's Shark

In June 1996 at a popular fish-feeding site on the Great Barrier Reef, a 21-year-old female had her left arm shredded and subsequently amputated because of an unprovoked attack by a 6-foot moray eel. In the same area, a large potato cod seized a snorkeler by the head. The snorkeler drowned.

Entertainment for scuba divers by fish feeding is big business. In South Australia and South Africa, groups of divers experience thrilling encounters with the great white shark, which can be observed from the relative safety of an underwater cage lowered from the boat. An appetizing cocktail of blood, fish oil and raw meat entices these huge carnivores to approach the divers. At some South Pacific dive destinations, feeding reef sharks follows similar lines.

With this experience, sharks lose their natural caution and could be conditioned to associate humans with food. Altered behavior and movement patterns such as "downstream circling" have been observed in great white sharks. Researchers using ultrasonic tracking devices found that following the cessation of chumming the sharks crisscrossed for several miles downstream of the baiting station for up to twelve hours, apparently searching for food.

It may be argued that there is some "public relations," and scientific advantage in observing sharks at close quarters to understand their behavior. However, this must be balanced against the risks of producing familiarity. According to the International Shark Attack file, the number of great white attacks has increased steadily worldwide over the past few decades.

The increasing practice of feeding marine animals should be seriously examined on the basis of potential injury to both humans and animals. The lessons of Pavlov's dogs and Skinner's rats appear to have been completely forgotten.

— Bill Douglas

South Pacific Underwater Medicine Society Journal, March 2001.

waters. Despite industry lobbying, in February, Deerfield Beach banned offshore feeding within 1,500 feet of its public beaches. Hillsboro Beach is considering a similar ordinance.

In addition, Lighthouse Point City Commissioners have asked for a statewide ban, and are considering an ordinance that would prohibit shark feeding dive oper-

ators from picking up passengers within city limits. Delray Beach City Commissioners have asked state authorities for careful consideration of the feedings, but stopped short of opposing the practice.

Several national environmental groups have joined the battle to stop shark feeding. They include the Environmental

Defense Fund, the Humane Society of the U.S., Reef Relief, Defenders of Wildlife, World Wildlife Fund, and the Surfrider Foundation. Groups like the Coral Reef Alliance (CORAL) and REEF, which have industry members on their boards and depend on industry goodwill, have avoided the fracas. The only environmental group in favor of feeding sharks is the PADI-sponsored Project Aware.

When Your Ship Leaves Without You

Will travel insurance bail you out?

Ed Franks was looking forward to his second dive trip on the *Tiata* in Papua New Guinea (PNG), but delays on Continental Airlines left him stranded in Los Angeles with no way to get to PNG until two days after the boat was to leave Milne Bay. Ed contacted Kevin Baldwin, owner of the *Tiata*, who offered to come back and pick him up. As an option, Ed also received what he interpreted as an assurance that he could apply his pre-

paid fare toward another trip at his convenience. Given that understanding (an exception to *Tiata's* policy of no refunds if a trip is canceled less than 60 days in advance), Ed decided to return home to Albany, NY and try to resolve the situation with the airline and the *Tiata*. That sounded better than waiting for the next plane, missing a couple of days of diving, and causing the divers on the *Tiata* to miss precious diving time while the boat

returned to port.

Remarkably, Continental did refund Ed's airfare for every leg of his trip, as well as additional lodging costs he had incurred due to their delays. But, in dealing with the *Tiata*, differences in interpretation arose. First, Ed requested a trip on a date when a private charterer had booked the entire boat. Kevin secured space for Ed and his dive buddy, but the trip was longer and more expensive than Ed's original package, and he declined to pay the