
Doctor Gruber's Secret Shark Sanctuary

Lemons, and tigers, and bulls, oh my!

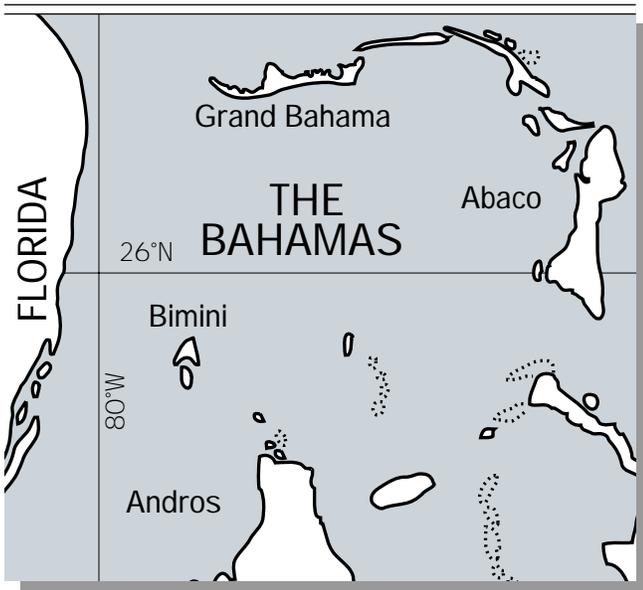
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Dear Fellow Diver,

It's 1:30 a.m. I'm crouched in a speeding 14-foot Aquasport somewhere on a Bahamian flat, trying to stay out of the spray. A huge yellow moon sits low on the horizon and stars pepper the night sky. The others slumped down in the boat with me look as nervous as I feel. After all, what we're looking for is big, deadly, and unhappy. I sure hope we find it. . . .

Welcome to Dr. Samuel "Sonny" Gruber's Bimini Biological Field Station -- the Shark Lab, where you study hard, sleep irregularly, get bitten by myriad insects, and do almost no scuba diving. Oh -- and learn a hundred live-aboard vacations' worth of knowledge about sharks.

Sonny Gruber is one of the deans of shark research. He's a welcome respite from Rodney Fox, who trolls for great whites with chunks of horses for *Shark Week* on the Discovery Channel. Gruber's academic pedigree is more than 30 years old, and his hands-on research with sharks is unparalleled. Outgoing, dedicated, and impossibly knowledgeable, he is the perfect teacher; he wonders at all things natural and is awestruck by sharks.



Strictly Business

This is a hard-working research lab of two double-wide trailers on a South Bimini lagoon, more Camp Minasawakee 1971 than *Sun Dancer* 1996. It's the private project of Dr. Gruber and his amazing wife, Marie. Aided by a small staff of loyal grad students, they are carpenter, boat repairman, cook, dishwasher, medical corpsman, plumber (Doc spent half a day digging up a recalcitrant sewage system), and entertain-

ment committee. While they do everything to make your stay pleasant and educational, make no mistake: shark research has priority over everything.

I was there on a six-day American Littoral Society program. These and ongoing Earthwatch programs pay the bills and put a bowl of conch chowder in the stomach of a 22-year-old grad student returning at 3:00 a.m. after tracking a lemon shark for five hours.

The lab bunks sleep 12 students in four dorm rooms. Meals are '60s-retro American comfort food: hot dogs, burgers, mac and cheese, lobster fried rice, pancakes, cereal, and all the

Bimini

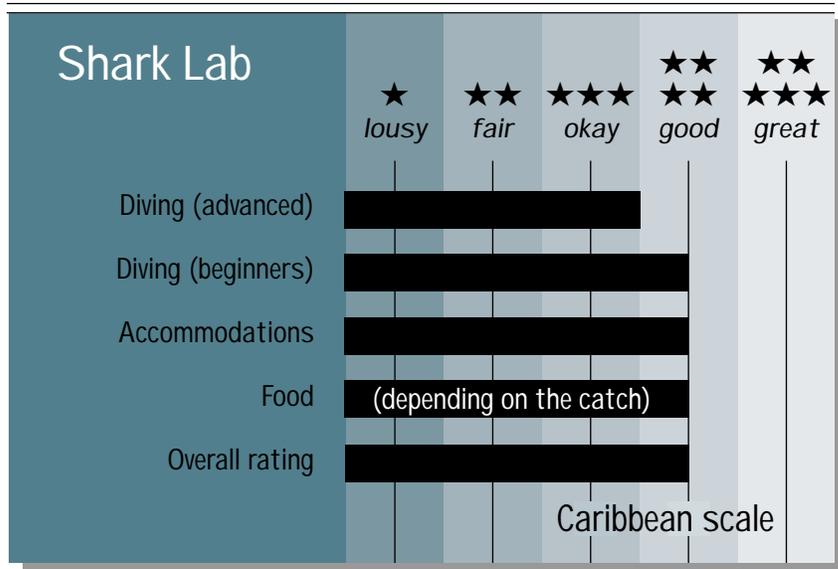
PBJ's you can eat. There's always fresh fruit. Most nights we had home-baked desserts. Kool-Aid's free. Marie Gruber is the cook and house mother; you won't be treated with more love and care unless you're at your mom's.

Hands On

I'm standing in 18 inches of water in the north Bimini lagoon, on the edge of the mangroves. "Doc. One headed your way," whispers a fellow student stationed up the shoreline. A beautiful 70-cm juvenile lemon shark is gliding along the base of the mangroves, searching, perhaps, for a small crab. "Don't move, don't move, don't move," shushes Gruber. We barely breathe. If this little guy would just swim into the gill net. . . . He swims past my feet, somehow sensing the net behind me, and swerves away. Damn. Fifteen minutes later, he finally swims into the net. The students gently bring him aboard, safe in a tray of water. Oh, no claspers -- it's a "she." I touch her skin, watch her nictitating membrane pop up to protect her eye, and record her tag information. She and Doc have met before, and she carries a small magnetic tag that can be read with a wand. She's almost two years old; she'll probably live to be 40 or older. Once she's reached 13 or so, she'll have a few pups every other year. Each will be born a 50-cm-long perfect shark, ready to take on the world. Before she's released, she's carefully walked by a staff member to insure that she's swimming well.

School! We sit in the lab on uncomfortable folding metal chairs. Doc is assisted by Dean Grubbs, a former student and bright young shark scholar. They trade lectures, show slides, and answer questions on shark evolution, taxonomy, behavior, and sensory abilities. Most of us scribble notes, and all fire questions at will. Like many good teachers, Doc tries to cram too much into the week, and he has difficulty terminating a tangent when the conversation wanders. "How'd we get here?" he asks. It doesn't much matter -- I learn a ton while he's talking about sting rays' eyes, although we're supposed to be discussing shark evolution.

School's out! Two staffers have radioed that a two-meter lemon shark is on a long line. We pile into the boat. Though



Underwater Explorers Society (UNEXSO) has announced it will offer divers SharkLab: A Shark Feeder and Behavior Specialty Course beginning this spring.

UNEXSO's SharkLab

UNEXSO describes its SharkLab as intensive coursework in shark biology and behavior and marine ecology during which divers will learn to use a shark feeding tube and steel-mesh, chainmail shark suit and gloves.

For more information on SharkLab, contact UNEXSO (800-992-3483 or 954-351-9889, fax 954-351-9740, e-mail 102006.3215@compuserve.com).

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this is probably the 400th lemon shark Doc has tagged, you'd think it was his first. He's visibly nervous, and will be until the shark is swimming under its own steam. The critter is carefully tied to the side of the boat while tissue samples are taken and he's measured ("270 cm total length -- a big one!"). Then he's released with a float attached to his tail to slow him a little while we snorkel alongside. Lucille, a 60-something grandmother, leads the snorkeling pack.

Send It to Suunto

Need servicing or repair? Reader Arthur Graf (San Antonio, Texas) says forget sending it to Seaquest. After waiting a couple of months, he got only "a long song and dance" that concluded by saying it was unrepairable. So he sent it directly to Suunto in Finland. The Finns returned it in two weeks — fully operational.

For instructions, contact Miss Kirsi Leppanen, Export Coordinator, Juvan teollisuuskatu 8, FIN-02920, Espoo, Finland, telephone 358-0-847033, fax 358-0-843810. Use Federal Express, Graf says. "The U.S. Post office is incapable of sending a U.S. money order to Finland."

Once the float is removed, he swims with the sinewy motion of a young or infirm shark. Quickly, though, the oxygen-laden water coursing over his gills revives him, his body stiffens, and he disappears into the gloom, eager to forget the experience. There we stand, knowing he could easily bite off a leg, but we're sad to see him go.

After Midnight

It's 1:35 a.m. The boat has pulled alongside the whaler, where staffers Dean and Tim are trying to get a tiger shark under control. The radio call came in just 30 minutes ago -- two tigers were on the long line. One wasn't doing well, so it was tagged and released quickly; the other was just fine and could wait for us. As Dean and Tim wrestle the shark, Doc is shouting orders all around. When we get the animal tied at both ends, Dean puts a tape measure on him. "Three fifty-six!" Three and a half meters. Eleven and a half feet of apex predator. A monster. Our boat threatens to tip because we're all on the side nearest the critter. The shark is released, again with a temporary float and strobe. Go into the water with him? Dean doesn't hesitate, and, well, this is why I came here.

Ditty Bag

The naturalist course I took cost \$800, but prices vary from course to course, and may be negotiable if you're a last-minute addition. You can always sign up through Earthwatch at 800-776-0188 (fax 617-926-8532) or check

out their Web page at <http://gaia.earthwatch.org/>. Contact Dr. Gruber at 305-274-0628 or sgruber@rsmas.miami.edu.

Chalk's Airline has regularly scheduled service to Bimini from Miami; Dr. Gruber often charters a 17-passenger plane out of Ft. Lauderdale. There's no phone at the lab — the nearest one is a couple of miles away at the Yacht Club. As one of our group discovered, medical attention is hard to get, so bring your usual back-of-beyond medical survival kit. Don't go if you're pet-allergic — the place is actually run by three dogs and a cat. My favorite was Tibi (short for "tiburon," Spanish for "shark") — a wonderful little puppy of questionable descent.

There's pretty good snorkeling a short walk from the club; depending on the program you're involved with, you might have the time and energy to enjoy it. If you can, arrange a trip to the *Sapona* wreck, which is covered with schools of fish. If you're strong and not too bright, climb 35 feet to the top of the wreck and leap into the water. The jump itself is fairly safe, but the climb up involves lots of rusty rebar. Scuba diving is generally done with Scuba Bimini out of the Yacht Club. We did one morning (two tanks) with them. Capt. John Norwood does a fine job and has a great boat. Nevertheless, fish volume and diversity were disappointing on both dives. I don't think this is Norwood's fault.

Booze is not permitted at the lab. There were boxes of condoms tacked to the wall of both bathrooms, with a note explaining that while sex was not condoned at the Lab, if you must, please do it safely and discreetly. Both boxes were empty.

I pull my mask onto my head and slip into the dark water. Doc will later point out that there were probably

three or four other tigers hanging around, seeing whether the commotion meant a meal for them. My light hits the shark, which is twice as long as I am -- a stunning sight. He doesn't notice me and is merely re-orienting himself. I swim behind him for a minute or two, working hard to stay within sight of a disoriented, slowly swimming animal. Finally the folks in the boat overtake and recapture the tiger. Dean unloops the tail rope, and the shark is gone.

Overhead, the moon has set and the stars are even brighter. Dean looks at me. "Well?"

I say the obvious: "Nothing like that in the world. Incredible."

K. L.

According to the Museum of Natural History, your chance are of being killed while playing soccer in Britain are 6,000 times greater than being killed by a shark. And more people in the U.S. are killed each year by pigs than by sharks.

Encounters with the Top Predator

Readers report on five Bahamian shark dives

Certainly one reason to dive the Bahamas is that at the right places you're bound to see sharks, up close and personal. However, even a shark dive may not be a shark dive. Look at these five readers' perspectives:

John A. McCormac (St. Petersburg, Florida) visited Scuba Bimini last summer with nine other divers, and though package value was good and the dive operation accommodating, the shark dive didn't measure up. "The advertised shark dive is infrequent, perhaps because it's a long distance, so the sharks are not accustomed to regular feedings. Only two nurse sharks, and a reef shark so small an amberjack chased it from the food. Long distance to shark dive site. Skip the shark dive, unless they develop it more."

Barry Yoss (Camp Hill, Pennsylvania) did the shark dive at Nassau Scuba Center in August. "Shark feed attracted 15 to 20 six- to eight-foot Caribbean reef sharks, one nurse shark, two

groupers, and numerous yellow-tails. Well controlled, but still exciting, especially with sharks coming over your shoulder; one brushed my chest. . . . The operation is friendly and accomodating."

The shark feed dive at Xanadu, says Lynn Offhaus of

Hamburg, New York, who was on Grand Bahama Island in December, was "exciting, and the crew made these dives safe." But other than that, "the reefs were mostly dead or badly damaged. We were allowed to dive our computers only on some of the dives. Changing dive sites was not offered for more experienced divers."

I don't believe it's wrong to feed sharks any more than I believe it's wrong to feed birds in the back yard. They benefit from the food, and we benefit from the experience of seeing them consume it. What's the harm?

Feed 'Em!

Sometimes if you want to experience something, you need to go out and make it happen. We need to learn to live together with other animals, not avoid them. We've spent the past eon fearing sharks. Isn't it about time we learned to appreciate them as something other than man-eating beasts that should be destroyed?

The food we're giving them is the same food they naturally eat (in fact, they're pretty picky about their diet). I'm sure the little bit each one gets from the milk carton doesn't even approach their daily needs. In the process, they're learning that we're their friends. We gain a better appreciation of their habits.

Bernie Hirsch
U.S.A.