

EXPEDITION SHARK LIVE!

For Shark Week 2008. Scientists on a mission to track the disappearance of Australia's iconic sharks. Writer Wendee Holtcamp and Photographer Cat Gennaro rack their expedition.

SHARK WEEK

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April 04, 2008

Fear

I've arrived in the gorgeous tropical north Queensland City of Port Douglas, where in a couple days I'll leave the marina aboard the Undersea Explorer, reporting on the research of Australian shark expert Richard Fitzpatrick and the filming of the Expedition Shark documentary during 10 days in the Coral Sea — and accompanied by underwater photographer Cat Gennaro.

During the few days it has taken me to arrive Down Under, I've reflected on the things people have said when I tell them what I'm about to do. The fact that I'll be in the water diving with sharks seems to seriously freak people out. I lose track of how many times I've heard, "Are you crazy?!"

My close friends already know the answer to that... So they ask reasoned questions and offer practical advice, just as my 11-year old son did. He showed me what his Wilderness Survival Guide advised, and seemed seriously concerned. "You're going to die," he told me.

"You know what to do if they attack?" my friend Trish said, with a too-serious demeanor. "You poke them in the eyeballs." She used her fingers for emphasis.

I listened in amusement at the shark party I threw for myself the night before leaving for Australia. On the



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invitation, I joked— “Send me on my sharky way - this may be the last time you see me with all my limbs!” I didn’t think they’d take this so seriously.

“You’ll be in a cage though, right?” Eileen asked.

“Oh no she’s not,” another friend answered for me.

“When Wendee first told me about diving with sharks, she was like, ‘It’s not one of those crazy things where you’re in a cage. It’s totally safe. I’ll be swimming in the water with them.’ And I’m thinking, ‘You mean, it’s not one of those safe things like you’re in a cage. It’s one of those crazy things where you’re swimming in the water with them!’”

But by far the most common question is, “Aren’t you scared?!”

And I have to answer honestly, “Not at all.” I really don’t have a fear of sharks, or of jumping in the water with them. Maybe I have a fear gene missing, but snakes and spiders and sharks and things that normally give people a fright get me totally stoked. I love the ocean and though I’ve never swum with sharks, the idea absolutely thrills me. Then again, as soon as I actually get in the water with them, I’ll probably pee my pants.

Psychiatrist and bestselling author of *The Road Less Traveled*, M. Scott Peck wrote, “The absence of fear is not courage. The absence of fear is some kind of brain damage.” As each day brought me closer to jumping overboard where grey reef and white-tip reef sharks will surround me in three dimensions, I started wondering why so many people have such fear of sharks and whether my lack of fear is normal.

I turn tables, and asked my friend Dana why she has a fear of sharks. “Because I saw JAWS!” she replied without hesitating even a second. “You hear in the news all the time about people getting killed by sharks.”

“Don’t you think that JAWS and the news sensationalize the horrors of shark attacks and that makes people afraid?” I replied. She seemed unconvinced. “Sharks only kill 5 to 10 people every year. But people kill something like 73 million sharks every year, with barbaric practices like shark finning, where fishermen catch sharks, cut off their fins and toss the animals back in the ocean to bleed to



die. The shark is then often used as bait for other sharks, and the rest of the shark is discarded.

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death. Who should really be more afraid? Us or the sharks?!”

“That’s awful,” says Dana. “I can’t believe they do that.”

Paige — who has known me since my kids were babies — has more practical insight about my lack of fear. “You have these two parts of you, Wendee. Part of you is a real risk taker. You go on all these adventures all over the world, and do these amazing things. And yet you always wear your seatbelt. Part of you is very cautious.”

I’ve trekked through Nepal and Peru at times when violent Maoists and drug lords seemed threatening presences, I’ve swum in a tributary of the Amazon River with piranhas and held a snoozing black bear on my lap. But I think she’s hit the spot: I’m no adrenaline junkie. The idea of skydiving or bungee jumping has no appeal. I am, in reality, a cautious person who makes informed decisions about an aspect of our world that is just more familiar to me than it is to most.

As Peck said, it’s normal to have a healthy fear of things that can harm us. Healthy, rational fear helps us keep us cautious and aware, and allows us to proceed with knowledge, safeguards and planning. But there are also irrational fears, exaggerated fears, fears based on watching or reading about gruesome, unfortunate deaths or events, and then mentally placing ourselves in a situation — such as death by shark attack — which is extraordinarily unlikely to occur.

Irrational fears have led to the mass slaughter and near-extinction of top predators around the world — from bears to lions to sharks — as people have sought to rid their world of what they perceive as “monsters.” Irrational fears can also sometimes keep people from experiencing some of the wonders of the planet. I know this all too well. I was terrified of flying for about a decade and it kept me from living the very life I most desired — traveling, writing, and seeing wildlife around the world. I overcame it by following the advice of Mark Twain, “Do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain.”

I *am* going to be voluntarily placing myself in shark-rich waters over the next several days. The crew will feed them to draw them close, lasso them by the tail to capture them, and then haul them on board the ship in order to retrieve satellite tracking devices placed on them to learn more about their ecology. Osprey Reef in the Coral Sea happens to be one of the world’s best places in the world to swim and dive with sharks, and for sure, swimming



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near sharks of any type involves real risks, even the risk of death.

But I know this also to be true: I'll be with some of the most experienced and safety-conscious shark biologists, experts and underwater photographers in the world. Without a doubt, they know what they are doing.

The reality is, everything in life carries risks. Driving in my car, living in a city, bearing children, flying, crossing the street. One thing I know for certain: I risk that when I am born, I will die. But this I also have found to be true. Life is best lived in service of those who can not speak for or easily help themselves – and that includes marine wildlife.

Sharks around the world are under an intense, relentless attack— from direct killing to habitat loss to ocean degradation and pollution. Not only have we degraded their oceanic habitat around the world, we kill them by the millions. Fishermen capture sharks of many species by hook and line, in longlines and in trawl nets. The cruelest fate of all is, once captured, to have one's top fin sliced off, and then tossed back in the water to bleed to death, unable to swim or survive.

Diving with sharks so that I can relate the experience to viewers and readers who may, like myself, open their own eyes and hearts to the realities of what sharks face. This is a planned, calculated risk I am more than willing to take. I'll don my wetsuit, put on my Scuba gear, lean back and plunge into a watery world teeming with marine life — including sharks, box jellyfish, scorpionfish, manta rays, and other deadlies. I'm thrilled. Let's go!

Photos: Cat Gennaro/DCL

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Yeah! Nice job Wendee. Nice portrayal of "balancing the fears and thrills" of nature adventuring.

Posted by: [Dr. Brian Shmaefsky](#) | [April 04, 2008 at 11:28 PM](#)



You are the most awesome woman in the world!!! Thoughtful, fascinating, well written....keep it up. I have complete faith you'll be fine. My big adventure is to go in search of more old growth trees in New Jersey, but we all do what we can....-)

Posted by: [Miranda Spencer](#) | [April 05, 2008 at 12:56 PM](#)



Wendee, you never cease to amaze me. This is one of your adventures that I definitely plan to follow closely. You are such an extraordinary writer and I'm sure you will do this adventure proud...as always. :) Stay safe and have LOTS of fun!!

Posted by: [Lisa](#) | [April 05, 2008 at 02:32 PM](#)



my uncle's been doing undersea photography for decades and he still manages to show up at family reunions every few years (with all his limbs) and loose envy from our more staid familiar elements.

have fun (and actually i think you are supposed to go for the nose, not the eyes).

respectfully,

g

Posted by: [greg harman](#) | [April 05, 2008 at 07:24 PM](#)



Thanks for taking us with you on your adventure, Wendee!

Posted by: [Christine Heinrichs](#) | [April 05, 2008 at 09:29 PM](#)



Austin & Taylor loved looking at their mom's shark pictures on-line! Be safe.

Posted by: [Jeff Kurr](#) | [April 06, 2008 at 01:02 PM](#)





I thought I was the only one that would love to dive with sharks. I'm going into marine biology to hopefully get to study sharks and my dream is to swim with a great white. Everyone says I'm crazy but I think that sharks are shown as enemies by the media and I want to help change that. I want to be able to show that sharks are an important part of this world and that humans and all animals can coexist peacefully. You have been a real inspiration to me! Thank you and good luck on your journey!

Posted by: **Chris Holder** | [April 09, 2008 at 03:13 AM](#)



Wow! Beautiful pics by Cat. Have an amazing time on the rest of your adventure Wendee, and take some Dramimine:)Those sharks are gorgeous!

Posted by: **Shannon** | [April 09, 2008 at 10:21 AM](#)



I love all your pictures they are great. I have never seen a real pic of a shark eating a seal. I did a project once for school on great white's. i luv sharks they are awesome! I can't believe how many teeth that they have!!!!

Posted by: **Sarah** | [April 12, 2008 at 02:57 PM](#)



Hola shark divers! Please observe the following international protocols...

- 1) SAFETY FIRST _ Please maintain all indispensable body parts outside of Jaws!
- 2) ANIMAL RIGHTS _ Post surgery, your toothy subjects will appreciate other kinds of snacks!
- 3) CERVEZA FRIA _ Drink, sing, etc. in the company of good friends, not Land Sharks!
- 4) MIDNIGHT OIL _ Keep the articles, photographs, and postings flowing!

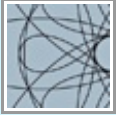
Thanks again for sharing everyone!!

Posted by: **Rick Chatham** | [April 14, 2008 at 05:53 PM](#)



"Ahhhh" it's "JAWS" .

Posted by: **samantha egnor** | [June 19, 2008 at 09:37 PM](#)



OH no it's "JAWS"

Posted by: samantha egnor | [June 19, 2008 at 09:39 PM](#)

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