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Swimming with Sharks

Q: How is the ocean like your office? A: Everywhere you look, there are sharks. To swim with the big guys, you've got to look fear in the face. BY BILL BELLEVILLE

Photographs by Norbert Wu

IT'S ALMOST ALWAYS unspoken. It's almost always unacknowledged. But it's there, in just about every workplace. It's the four-letter F-word that paralyzes people and organizations. It's F-E-A-R. Fear of change. Fear of losing control. Fear that something you've created—an idea, a plan, a product—will be shot down.

How can we get over the things that scare us, and break out of that deer-in-the-headlights trance? FDR uttered the famous line "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," but it was Eleanor Roosevelt who offered a prescription for overcoming fear:

You must "look fear in the face.... You must do the thing you think you cannot do."

Recently I put her advice to the test. I looked into the cold, unblinking eye of a seven-foot Caribbean reef shark while about 30 other sharks circled all around me. And I discovered, 35 feet underwater, that sometimes fear is good. Because if you're never scared, you never take chances.

"When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."—*Samuel Johnson, 18th-century English essayist and poet*

I've stopped telling friends that in two weeks I'll be diving among sharks. Their re-



ACTION ITEM SHARK SHOTS

THE MOST DRAMATIC WAY TO COMMUNICATE TO THE AIR-BREATHING WORLD YOUR CLOSE encounters with charismatic megafauna such as sharks is to photograph them. But what kind of underwater camera should you use?

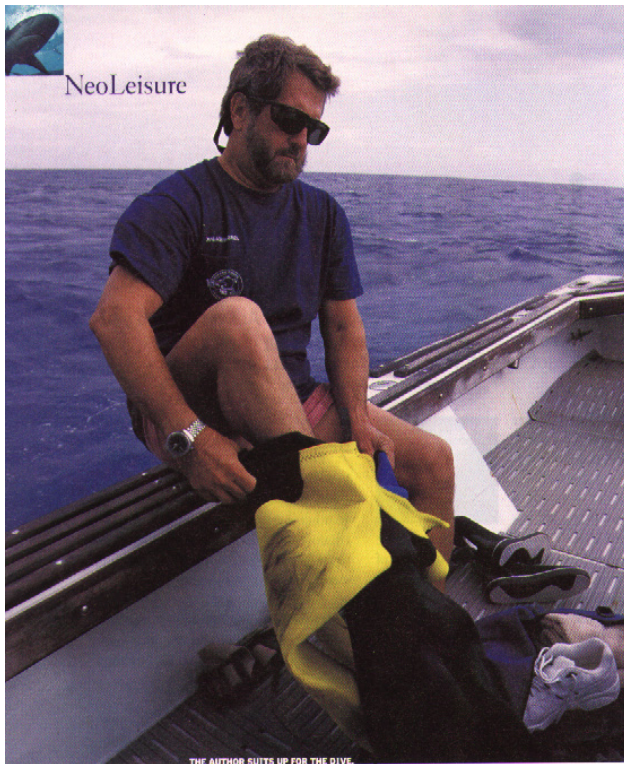
Norbert Wu, a renowned nature photographer and the author of *How to Photograph Underwater* (Stackpole, 1994), suggests opting for an automatic, point-and-shoot camera. You don't want to be futzing with the focus when you're worrying about the sharks.

Check out one of the automatic 35-mm cameras manufactured by **Sea&Sea**, such as the MX-10. Made from a durable, impact-resistant polymer, this model comes with a built-in flash, three lenses (wide-angle, close-up, and macro-), all attachable underwater, and the capacity to add strobes and filters. The MX-10 works at depths of up to 150 feet. As for film, Wu says that 100 ASA color-print film is far more forgiving than slide film.

Coordinates \$413 for the MX-10. Sea&Sea Underwater Photography USA, 760-929-1909; www.sea-sea.infotopia.or.jp



NO, IT'S NOT YOUR CFO. IT'S A CARIBBEAN REEF SHARK, WITH FRIENDS, IN 35 FEET OF WATER OFF OF LONG ISLAND, THE BAHAMAS.



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THE AUTHOR SUITS UP FOR THE DIVE

actions have been less than encouraging. "Isn't that, ah, awfully dangerous?" inquires one buddy, a marketing VP.

"You'll be inside a cage, right?" asks another, an editor.

And from my attorney: "Sounds like a death wish to me."

I just smile and explain that sharks are essentially shy and that a cage won't be necessary. According to everything I know about dangerous animals, I'm far more likely to be attacked by a domestic pig than by a shark. *Jaws* made us silly on the subject.



I tell my friends, by depicting every sleek, stiff-dorsaled creature as a demonic eating machine. My friends remain silent, but I can tell they're unconvinced.

To reassure myself, I call up Dr. John McCosker, senior scientist at the California Academy of Sciences. McCosker, a renowned ichthyologist, has coauthored a book with Richard Ellis on the most dangerous of the breed (*Great White Shark*, Stanford University Press, 1991). He sets me straight.

"Sharks have a lot more to fear from us than we do from them," he says. Worldwide, they've been overfished for their fins and meat, and for sport, and they've been



SHARK STROKES

PEOPLE ARE OFTEN DRAWN TO SCUBA DIVING by cheery claims that it won't make them break a sweat. The sport's proponents rarely mention physical fitness. "And that," says

Michael Bane, "is just plain dumb." Bane, author of *Diving on the Edge*, complains that divers "are notorious for being out of shape."

How can divers work themselves out of their jellyfish physiques? The answer is obvious: by hitting the pool once or twice a week. Swimming improves cardiovascular fitness, which helps divers use air efficiently underwater, and it also helps them feel comfortable in the water.

Bane has put together a swimming-based workout that will get a reasonably proficient swimmer in good shape for diving within three months. "But before you climb out of your Barcolounger," he says, "get your doctor's approval."

Total Time About 30 minutes.

Warm-Up Swim freestyle for 300 meters at a slow, steady pace.

Main Set Swim five 100-meter lengths, with 30 seconds of rest between each length.

Kick Set Using a kickboard, kick your way through five 50-meter lengths, taking a 30-second rest between each one.

Cool-Down Swim 100 meters, any stroke.

Tip When starting out, take a break whenever you feel fatigued. But make your way through the entire workout. Once your stamina is up, don't rest unless you absolutely have to. By the third month, you should be able to do the workout twice a week.

Coordinates \$14.95. *Diving on the Edge: A Unique Guide to Scuba for New Divers*. The Lyons Press, 1-800-836-0510



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OMAR SETTLES DOWN BESIDE ME. HE IS CARRYING A LONG METAL POLE. "OMAR," I ASK, AS CASUAL AS CAN BE, "IF THIS DIVE IS SO SAFE, WHY ARE YOU CARRYING THAT BIG STICK?"

terrorized by humans made stupid by fear. But of the 369 species of shark, just three—the great white, the bull, and the tiger—have attacked people without provocation, and even then, only on rare occasions.

I lodge all this comforting information safely inside my brain. But in my amygdala, the part of the brain that relates to our most basic survival mechanisms, I'm replaying the theme from *Jaws*.

I admit it: I'm scared by the prospect of slipping into the ocean and getting bumped a couple of notches down the food chain by a creature more merciless than a CFO.

As I pack for my rendezvous with dorsal-finned destiny, I tell myself that I'm the genetic victim of the flight-or-fight syndrome. We battle fear with great explosions of adrenaline, or we run from it. That was a useful reaction when we lived in caves. But today a more rational response is required. I figure that if I can use my scuba diving skills to exorcise the most basic fear of all—that of being eaten—I can cope with most anything.

"It is not death that a man should fear; it is never beginning to live."—Marcus Aurelius, second-century Roman emperor and philosopher

I've arrived at Stella Maris Resort Club on Long Island in the Bahamas, my shark-diving base for the next few days. Around the world, there are more than 150 resorts and dive companies that feature shark diving. Stella Maris is the granddaddy of them all. If you're going to swim with the sharks, you might as well do it with people who

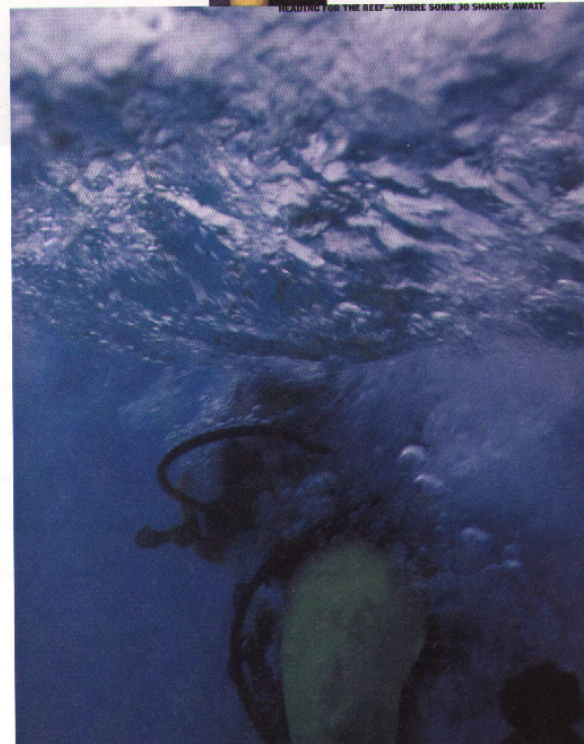
have a great deal of experience in such matters.

At 9 a.m. sharp on my second day at Stella Maris, I climb aboard a 32-foot inboard cruiser, which will take me to the sharks. Joining me are photographer Norbert Wu and our



HEADING FOR THE REEF—WHERE SOME 30 SHARKS AWAIT

guides, Bahamians Omar Daley and Christopher Carroll Smith ("call me 'Smitty'"). Soon they've maneuvered the boat over Shark Reef, 35 feet down. "Here we have the fish and the coral—everything we need for the beautification of the reef," says Smitty. Then, as an





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afterthought: "And here, especially, we have the sharks."

Years ago, Smitty remembers, a German

documentary team arrived on Long Island to film sharks. But finding candid subjects to terrorize the reef and to smile for the camera waan't easy. So local dive masters obliged by spearing fish to draw blood—a surefire shark dinner bell. Other photographers followed, the shark-baiting continued, and soon scores of adventurous divers were joining in on the action.

I hoist on my scuba tank and perch on the stern of the boat to put on my fins. Looking down into the gin-clear water, I see great, gray shapes moving in slow circles. Sharks have appeared as if lured by the sound of our motor, offering a Pavlovian display of fins and tails. The show has begun without us.

Omar settles down beside me in his scuba gear. He is carrying a long metal pole. "Omar," I ask, as casual as can be, "if this dive is so safe, why are you carrying that big stick?"

"It's my cover-your-ass stick, mon," he explains, before putting his regulator in his mouth and slipping into the sea. Like a true believer, I follow him. This will work, I tell myself, because Omar has done it many times before and he isn't even mildly scared. Then again, he has that stick.

"A good scare is worth more to a man than good advice."—Edgar Watson Howe, late-19th-century essayist

A dozen Caribbean reef sharks are circling me. I con-



A DOZEN SHARKS ARE CIRCLING ME. I FOCUS ON TRYING TO FIN ABOUT IN SLOW, EVEN STROKES, JUST AS I WOULD IF I WERE ON THE REEF WITHOUT SHARKS.

centrate on trying to fin about in slow, even strokes, just as I would if I were on the reef without sharks. I check my air-pressure gauge, neutralize my buoyancy, and then—reminding myself that this is perfectly natural—drift down to the sandy bottom.

A lone seven-foot shark swims straight toward me. I want to run but I can't, and for the most fleeting of moments, I feel as if I'm trapped in an all-too-real B-movie. Remembering the old adage about not

showing fear to a mad dog, I stay my ground. At a distance of three feet, the shark turns abruptly, as if pulled by an invisible chain. The shark repeats its run-and-dodge several more times and then resumes swimming overhead.

Norbert Wu, who seems completely fearless underwater, signals for me to ascend to the



OMAR DALEY



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circling predators, so he can photograph me with them. I rise, ever so slowly, and the sharks widen their circle just a wee bit to avoid bumping me.

I reach inside myself for something—anything—to help me keep my cool. Breathing, which I take for granted back on the surface, becomes a tangible, auditory event down here. In comes the good air in a long, sustained suck; out goes the exhaust air in a stream of exploding bubbles. To control my nerves, I control my breathing.



SHARK BAIT?

YOU DON'T HAVE TO FLY TO THE BAHAMAS TO SWIM with the sharks. Each time you step into your workplace, you're entering shark-infested waters. They're circling all around—people who are competing for the same things you are: a fat pay packet, a fancy title, a hot project. If you're not moving forward, you're shark bait. How do you shark-proof your career? For answers, we went to **Harvey Mackay**, CEO of Mackay Envelope Corp. and author of the best-selling *Swim with the Sharks*.

When are people most susceptible to a shark attack? "Whenever there's a big change: Your company is being acquired, or it's downsizing your department. To protect yourself, build your network of contacts, so you'll always know what's going on around you."

What should you do when a shark comes after you? "Buy time. You need to discover the person's hidden agenda and to consult with your network. No matter how big the problem is, never let yourself make a quick, emotional decision."

Have you ever gone swimming with those other sharks—the underwater kind? "My family and I went scuba diving off the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, but we didn't see any sharks. We had 60 minutes of instruction before the dive, which is just ridiculous—and unsafe."

Coordinates \$12.95. *Swim with the Sharks: Without Being Eaten Alive*. Fawcett. 800-733-3000, www.randomhouse.com



AND THEN SOMETHING MAGICAL HAPPENS. I SEE THE SHARKS MORE CLEARLY. FAR FROM BEING MIND-EATING MACHINES, THEY ARE ELEGANT, EVEN BEAUTIFUL BEASTS.

turning it into a meditative exercise. As I do so, the environment seems to absorb me.

And then something magical happens. I see the sharks more clearly. Their gill slits, eyes, and mouths come into focus. The grace of their swimming begins to awe me. They barely twist their bodies to make a turn; in their movements, they expend hardly any energy. Far from being mindless eating machines,

