

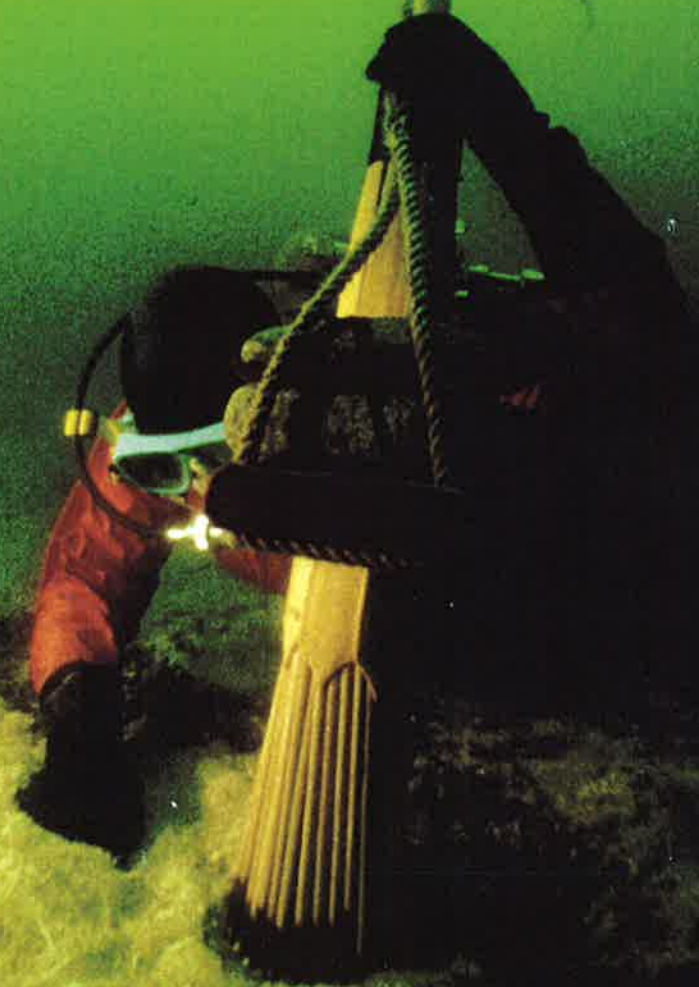
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# DIVER



AUSTRALIA'S REMOTE REEFS | VICTORIA'S SECRET | WHALE SHARKS | SQUIDS | 'HOLY GRAIL' SHIPWRECK



## Shelling Out

Currency from the Sea





# Ocean Doom = Tour





# Sm Boom

■ An unnamed bommie in remote northeastern Australia reveals pristine marine wilderness, likely unseen by human eyes until recently. Here, soft and hard corals compete with anemones, sponges and much more for space. Wherever you look, there's a profusion of life. Distance, perhaps more than government decree, so far is the guardian of such virgin sites, accessible only by liveaboard charter boats that travel days to reach them. See stories this issue.

Photo: © Justin Gilligan - gilliganjustin@hotmail.com

Knowingly or otherwise, are scuba enthusiasts contributing to the loss of pristine marine environments by diving them so that they become the next overcrowded, under-protected reef?

Text by Peter Meyer  
Photography by Justin Gilligan

A disturbing trend in travel today, often called the 'Tourism of Doom' or 'Doom Tourism,' refers to an increasing number of people taking vacations to exotic places and environments that, seemingly, are doomed to destruction.

It used to be that the more adventurous travelers targeted these destinations simply to appreciate their unique, typically remote, natural environments. Now, many travelers freely admit they're carefully choosing such places to experience untrammelled environment before they're overrun and, inevitably, "get worse".

## How Pristine...Really?

How about one last visit to the Galapagos Islands before tourism and illegal fishing destroy them? Wait a moment. Aren't the Galapagos Islands one of the most remote, protected areas left in the world? That's what I thought until I learned the real scoop from recently returned diver friends. Seems the truth is far from what most perceive. According to one news source, the population in the Galapagos has jumped more than 50 per cent in the last few years and construction is booming. As with so many other special destinations around the world, conservation there, evidently, is a very low priority for most locals who are just trying to survive. And since most of them make their living in the tourist industry, the more visitors the worse the problem becomes.

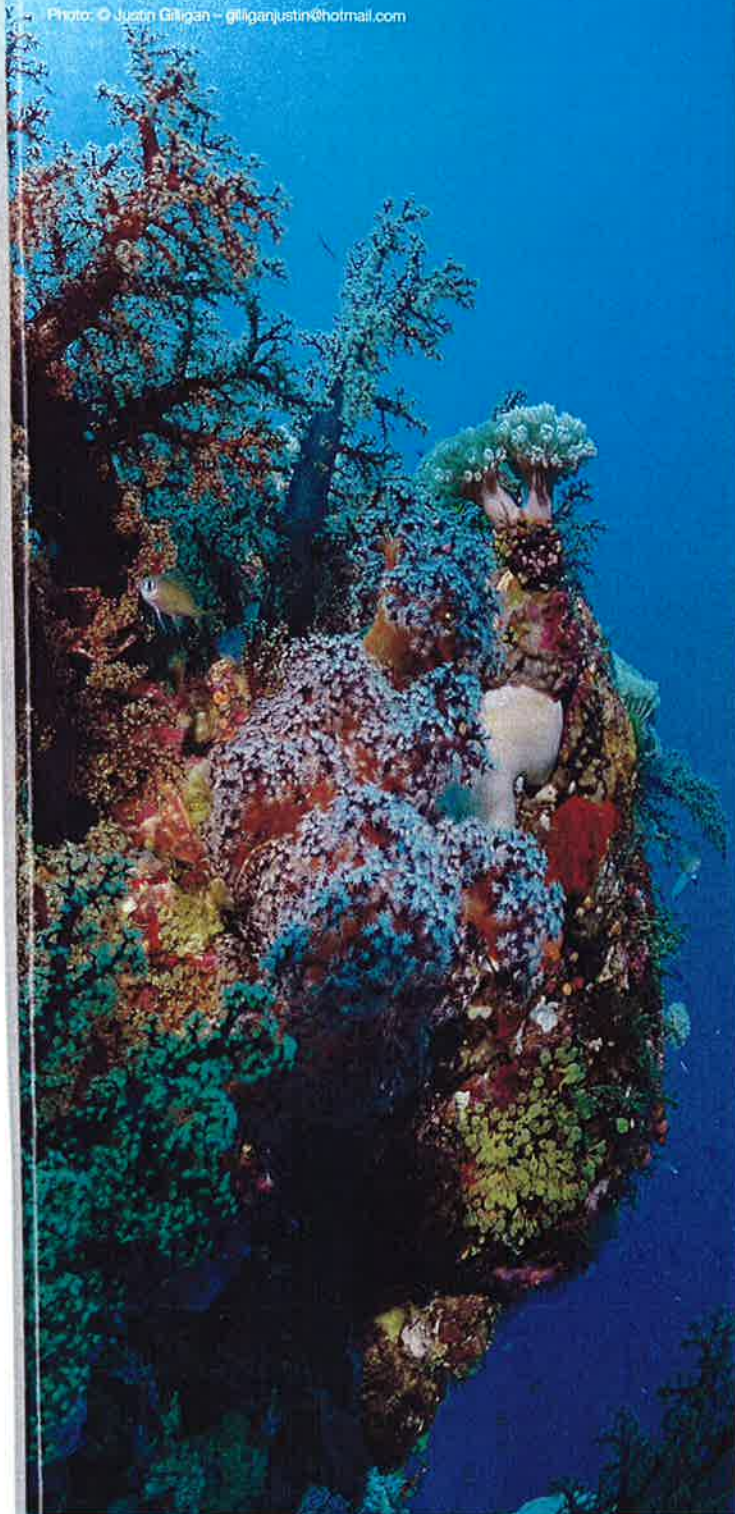
Does that sound like a protected wilderness to you? Conflict is inevitable when people consciously plan vacations "to explore unique environments before they disappear", and then by visiting them contribute to the decline of that particular natural setting. Been to Hawaii lately? While many people argue development is good in many ways (stronger economy, jobs, etc.), there's no doubt that undeveloped, pristine areas morph into commercial 'tourist' destinations as they become more popular.

The following statement issued in April 2007 by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), pretty much summarizes the Galapagos situation:

"A UNESCO mission has confirmed serious threats to the Galápagos National Park and Marine Reserve and welcomed ambitious measures announced by the Ecuadorian authorities to preserve the site on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

The mission confirmed the threat to the outstanding value and physical integrity of this iconic World Heritage site mainly from: the growing encroachment of invasive species, increasing human immigration, uncontrolled development of tourism, and the failure of various institutions and agencies to deal with these threats.

The mission was carried out in keeping with a decision by the World Heritage Committee to take stock of the situation in the Galápagos Islands, and at the invitation of the Ecuadorian government. Held from 8 to 13 April, it was led by Tumu te Heuheu,





Chairman of UNESCO's World Heritage Committee, Kishore Rao, Deputy Director of UNESCO's World Heritage Centre, and Berndt von Droste of the World Conservation Union (IUCN)."

## But Dive Travel Isn't Normal Tourism

My diver friends and I used to have heated discussions about the environmental appropriateness of keeping animals and fish in zoos and aquaria. Nowadays, we must consider seriously our impact as tourist divers on those same animals and fish in the wild. While many visit zoos and aquaria for their wildlife fix, now a growing number of people regularly pursue 'real life' adventures in the wild. If this trend continues the zoos and aquaria may end up the only places to experience 'wilderness.'

So, if it's getting that bad, is it any wonder more travelers are motivated to visit places like the Galapagos before they're destroyed: if we can't stop the development steamroller we should get our fix before the damage is done, the thinking goes. But is this sound? Many divers – my friends and me included – consider ourselves eco conscious but our subjective view doesn't appear to be in step with industry insiders who say we may well be doing more harm than good at home and abroad.

Collectively, divers are part of the 'real life' adventure crowd and at the very least we have above average insight with respect to the wild – above and below the water – relative to most others. I mean, we've been at it since Jacques Cousteau and Emile Gagnan modified a gas valve, in 1943, allowing us to stay underwater for prolonged periods. That said, it's also true we spend most of our 'dive' vacations out of the water and, consequently, explore more terrestrial habitat than marine; hence, we're more aware than most travelers to remote areas.

Remember the saying, "Take Nothing but Pictures, Leave Nothing but Footprints." Well, are we missing something? If we live by that creed we shouldn't need to move on continually. Recently, I was in Cabo San Lucas on my way back from a *Nautilus Explorer* trip to Mexico's Revillagigedo Archipelago, and have to say I longed for the old Cabo of 10 and more years ago. Gone are the packed dirt streets and clean air. Now they're paved roads with concrete dividers, lots of traffic and strip bars. I'm sure the locals have more jobs, but at what cost?

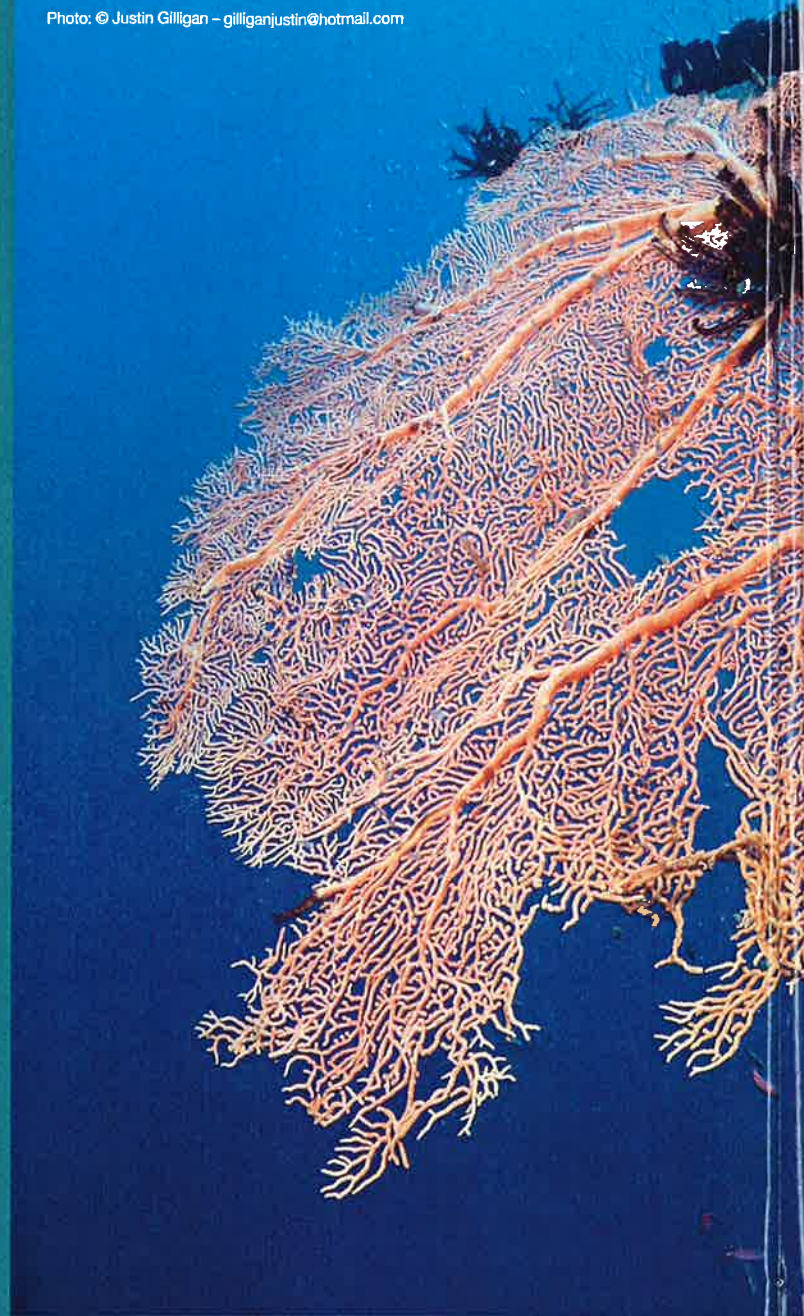
At the DEMA show last year, I noticed a new dive resort, which happened to be in Mexico, use the phrase "the way diving used to be in Cozumel" (i.e. before the tourist stampede) to advertise their new "unspoiled" destination. I thought about that and concluded that if this destination really was "unspoiled" they probably shouldn't be advertising at all. Everyone wants in on the newest, greatest, unspoiled destination before the rest of humanity spoils it, after all. Does this mean that proactively we're wearing out the good dive sites and replacing them with new ones that we'll abuse in the future? How do we move on to what's next without dooming it to destruction? Instead of advertising, shouldn't we be keeping secrets?

## 'Interaction' the New Thing

Another growing trend is the wildlife 'interaction' adventure. Looking doesn't seem to cut it any longer; we want to interact with those wild lions, elephants, crocodiles, sharks and mantas. Meaning, we want to feed them or otherwise influence their normal lives. This ups the potential danger stakes. Clearly, interaction

■ Clad in myriad life forms, this remote dive site at the very edge of northeastern Australia's Continental Shelf, puts a face to the name 'hotspot,' a scientific term to describe an area of extraordinarily high biodiversity. Ultimately, is tourism doom the destiny of such pristine locales? See stories this issue.

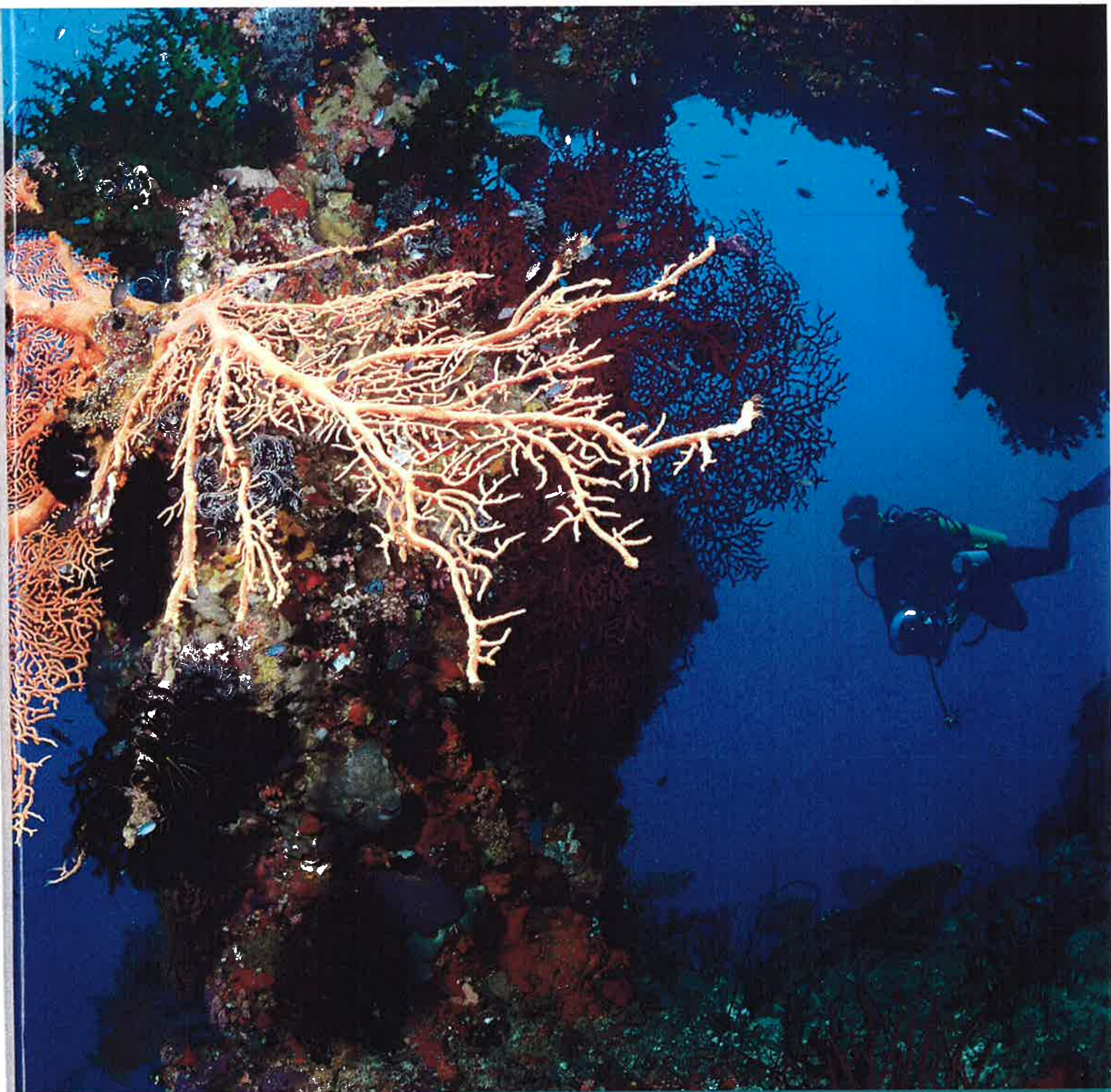
Photo: © Justin Gilligan – gilliganjustin@hotmail.com



increases risk. Remember the crocodile hunter and his stingray adventure? Maybe thrill seeking is an innate need and motivator in us all that the well-heeled tourist can satisfy; there's no question these interaction adventures cost more.

Is the concurrent growth of the population and tourism simply an unstoppable reality that will eventually turn all of our natural dive destinations into a version of Walt Disney World's Shark Reef in Typhoon Lagoon? I'm not entirely opposed to Shark Reef, you understand, or the Disney experience in general, but it doesn't work for me. I chose diving as an avocation because it's clearly an adventure in a real underwater environment. Disney's world may be pretty, and it may provide a benign environment for dive training, but it's not real – no matter what anyone says! And that





means many of us will travel to exotic locales and contribute – inevitably – to their decline. It's a quandary that allows me to see aquaria and zoos in a different light, but I digress.

### Controversial Contact?

Back to wild animal interaction, and shark feeding in particular. Is this pursuit another environmental incursion that, ultimately, will have a detrimental effect on the unsuspecting king of underwater beasts? Critics of shark feeding conclude that participants – slowly but surely – are causing sharks to become dependent on divers for food, irreparably damaging their normal life patterns and of other marine life and the environment (<http://www.reefrelief.org/>). Then we have news sources citing numerous

other organizations – including Sea Sheppard, PADI and DEMA – in support of 'responsible' shark diving (see: <http://www.cdn. info/news/editorial/o000930.html>). So where do we turn for a truly objective view of these issues? Is there such a thing?

I think we have to take stock on a basic level. Does it make sense to recycle? Does it make sense to reduce our carbon emissions? Does it make sense to leave the underwater world as we found it? If so, then shark feeding makes no sense. It can influence the natural behaviour of sharks, and other underwater creatures for that matter. Seems pretty simple to me.

The notoriety of shark diving was underscored February 24 with the death of diver Marcus Groh, while diving from Jim Abernethy's vessel *Shearwater*, about five nautical miles north of Great Isaac



Cay in the Bahamas. Shark experts from just about everywhere have dived into this discussion – ad nauseam – and it seems to me that nobody really has any idea what they're talking about. Shark operators say interaction is good because it elevates public awareness and PADI and DEMA support the operators. Yet, in 2001 the State of Florida, at the urging of the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC), banned shark-feeding dives in Florida. Hawaii has done the same.

So, again, whom do we believe? Here are two opinions quoted from a CDNN shark feeding report and chronology that traces the activity back to the early 1990s (see: <http://www.cdnn.info/special-report/sharkbyte/sharktimeline.html>):

"Regardless of your feelings about marine interactive dives that involve feeding, I hope you see this ruling as highly discriminatory...the precedent established last week by the FWCC, if left unchallenged, can be used by other government entities (sic) to extend their regulatory control over diving, making sharks and divers the ultimate losers in this media-induced 'summer of the shark'..."

– Dave Taylor, Rodale Inc

"It is only a small, profit-motivated group presently profiting from commercial exploitation of Florida's marine wildlife who will be the 'losers' when shark feeding is banned. The beach going public 'wins' because they no longer will have to worry about 'spillover' dangers from nearby shark feeding operations. The sport diving community 'wins' by regaining the opportunity for all divers to safely observe and explore ocean wild places and wildlife. Most of all, the sharks 'win' because they get to go back to just being sharks, instead of manipulated stunt performers."

– Marine Safety Group

I'm confused. How about you? If we zero in on shark diving alone, we have to contend with a lot of conflicting information. So, whom do we believe when it comes to the pros and cons of shark diving? Neal Watson and the Bahamas shark dive operators tell us "they do it the right way" but Jim Abernethy does it the wrong way, a contention supported by the death of Marcus Groh. We have industry experts pointing fingers at each other and third party environmental organizations pointing at all of them. Everyone has an agenda. There's a great deal of confusion and genuinely useful (scientific) information is conspicuous by its absence.

## Aquaria vs. The Wild

So, what is the real difference between viewing the sharks in a public aquarium and viewing the live bulls, tigers, lemons, hammerheads and other sharks advertised by Jim Abernethy's Bahamas-based Scuba Adventures?

Yes, the sharks in the Bahamas are in their natural environment and those in the aquarium are, well, not. That much is obvious and I'm avoiding the "set them free" argument here. Essentially, there are those who will be happy to observe sharks in an aquarium and those who want to really look 'em in the eye or better yet, tempt them with bait to elicit feeding behaviour. All will be well as long as "nobody loses an eye," as my mother, and probably yours, would say.

The recent "shark influenced" death of Marcus Groh caused a public outcry only because someone actually died, not because the shark was being abused. Translation: people are more important than the environment, and always will be. As long as that priority is unchanged it's reasonably safe to conclude that the

environment above and below water will remain in jeopardy.

I use the term "shark influenced" because all the experts appear to agree that the shark was instinctively attempting to determine if the victim was a preferred form of food. Humans are not, according to expert opinion. So, it could be said this was more a shark 'accident' than 'attack', which carries the more aggressive connotation. Regardless, Mr. Groh is dead and I do offer my condolences to his family. It's especially unfortunate that his untimely demise has given rise to a media circus with which no one, least of the bereaved, should have to contend.

Here's how one online spectator summed up the event: "This idiot man went swimming with sharks who eat anything and anyone. He was eaten and died. This should not surprise anyone - sharks do not play by people rules, Jim Abernathy's included. Moral of this story - don't swim with sharks. End of story."

Google 'shark attack' and you'll likely get more than two million hits, as I did, running the gamut from Wikipedia definitions to television programs to shark fatality reports of every description to shark attack photos for the morbidly curious. There is more stuff out there on this topic than you can shake a shark fin at even if it offers little substance.

Google 'shark fining' and you'll get another million hits or so, some of which will link you to serious environmental organizations such as Sea Sheppard (see: [http://www.seashepherd.org/longline/longline\\_shark\\_finning.html](http://www.seashepherd.org/longline/longline_shark_finning.html)), which tells us that only about 12 people are killed each year by sharks while 100 million or so sharks die at the hands of people in the same time. It's staggering!

Anyway, back to the tourism of doom. Let's consider some practical matters of importance to the traveling diver, which begin with the way we plan our dive trips. Of course, good diving, great beaches and bars and discount airfares are all important. But let's go further and more closely scrutinize the destination being considered.

## Government Policy

Is the local government eco friendly? Does it enforce environmentally sound practices: do they crack down on illegal fishing, do they support mooring buoys at dive destinations, etc.? Once you start seeking answers to these questions you will soon be able to determine if you want to visit the place. You'll likely be surprised how many places will fall off your list. For instance, would you spend your holiday money at a resort in an area that supports Japanese whaling? For a good many reasons, some dive destinations do. (see: [http://www.cdnn.info/act/caribbean\\_alert/caribbean\\_alert.html](http://www.cdnn.info/act/caribbean_alert/caribbean_alert.html)).

## Dive Operators

Are the dive operators involved in any type of environmental protection? Many are, and many aren't – it's up to you to find out before paying them your hard earned income. I mentioned my recent Mexico trip on the *Nautilus Explorer* (see page 64) because, among other things, I was very impressed with their commitment to environmental protection. They help fund and support this essential activity (see: <http://www.seawatch.org/index.php>) to make a contribution, as we all should, and also to preserve the environment they explore and that makes their business possible. If the operators you are considering do not care enough about the environment that gives their enterprise a reason for being, then



they don't deserve your business. As well, simple matters like the use of mooring buoys instead of anchoring on reefs should be in practice. They do make a difference and you can research this in advance. If it looks low rent on line it probably is.

## Resort Operators

Are the resort operators sensitive to the environment and its protection? Do they recycle their plastic drink containers – most don't – or use reusable glass containers instead – again, most don't. Does that make a difference to you? I remember being on Grand Cayman some years ago and wondering where all the plastic beer glasses went? Believe me, there were millions of them – many were mine. I did some research. I followed a garbage truck one day and discovered that they were barged out to sea and dumped...I was horrified and from then on requested my drinks in a glass. It wasn't a big deal and most bars and restaurants were happy to oblige. And the same rules apply here at home. Supporting the use of drive through Styrofoam and plastic in your neighbourhood is to live by a double standard. Many quandaries! Some eco info is difficult to learn before a trip because many destinations hide their undesirable practices from view, but it's worth it to be tenacious. I hope you agree. By the way, it looks like the Cayman Islands are now recycling at least some items (waste oil, lead batteries, aluminum cans, and plastic six-pack holders (see: <http://www.johngrayrecyclers.org/id54.html>) so progress is being made and, who knows, maybe some of their visitors have opted to explore new destinations?

## Take Action

Dive travel planning today is decidedly more involved than before. I strongly recommend an environmental review be an integral part of that process before you commit to a particular destination. If you practice due diligence in this regard you'll be making an important contribution and you'll thank yourself. While in Costa Rica last year we were treated to a full week of construction noise as workers removed a grove of trees full of Howler monkeys nearby our hotel. The resort condos going up were planned with a septic field a couple of hundred yards away from a pristine bay with a lovely black sand beach. Go figure.

Each of us can and should determine what is environmentally acceptable and that includes the degree to which we want to interact with wildlife. Ultimately, each of us must do our part to help and, again, I suggest we put all the 'expert' opinion aside and consider whether we are simply carefree adventurers and observers or something more. Are we taking only pictures and leaving only footprints? Or, are we actively engaged in the destruction of the environment we profess to respect?

Turns out when Joni Mitchell penned her iconic song, *Big Yellow Taxi*, the lyrics, "they paved paradise and put up a parking lot..." were a commentary on much more than that time in the early 1970s. We really need to pay attention, folks.

Please do. Thanks. ♦

# Our diving buddies



[www.cookislands.travel](http://www.cookislands.travel)

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