

A shark called Alek

FIONA AYERST AND COURTNEY GRAHAM

What could a 14-year-old Canadian boy, fighting Leukaemia, possibly have in common with one of the oceans most magnificent predators, a great white shark? They both share the name Alek.

Aleksander Djermanovic is a newly certified scuba diver who is just beginning his brave battle against the disease that is attacking his body.

His mother, Natasa, a diver as well is the Ontario (Canada) contact for Scuba Diving Canada - a non-profit organisation. She is working hard to rally the international dive community around her son and give him hope to be able to re-enter the water very soon.

OCEANS Research made contact with Alek on the global internet networking phenomenon, Facebook. Because Alek loves sharks and is especially keen on great white sharks, his mother contacted white shark researcher, Ryan Johnson, a director of OCEANS Research in Mossel Bay.

Ryan decided that his team would name the next shark that was tagged and tracked, after this courageous young man, Aleksander Djermanovic. Alek has shown such strength and determination in the face of adversity that the OCEANS team deemed it fitting that a powerful ocean predator would be named after him.

The OCEANS Research team was excited to be able to dedicate the shark to Alek and knew this great honour would make him so proud and happy.

The research students and interns studying the white sharks of Mossel Bay could regularly keep Alek informed about encounters with his namesake. This would be a wonderful way of communicating with Alek by letting him know a bit about the behaviour of sharks and even more importantly that there are people, even on the other side of the world, who care.

On 25 May, shortly after sunrise the crew placed an acoustic tag on a 2.2m great white shark next to Seal Island. Selecting the right shark to tag is always a slightly stressful choice, as transmitters are expensive (R3 000 - R5 000 each) and sharks are unpredictable.

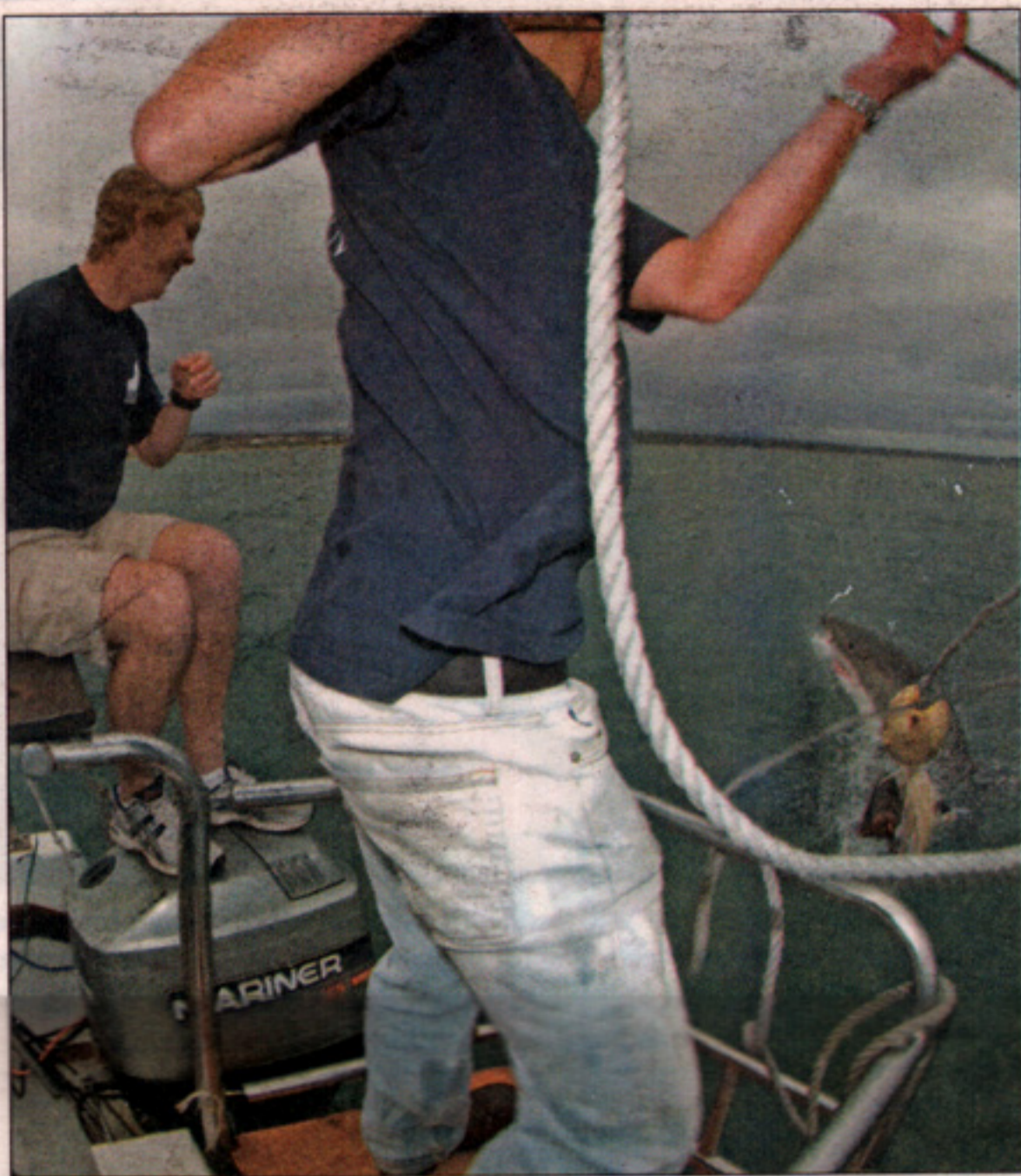
Ideally, the research team wants to place tags on sharks that will stay in the bay long enough to collect sufficient data about the individual's movement patterns. It is important for research purposes to tag and track sharks of varying sizes.

Juvenile shark

Larger sharks are not currently in the bay at this time of year so the research team decided to tag and track a juvenile shark. Although small in size, "Alek" was very feisty and interested in the research vessel so the team decided this would be the perfect shark to deploy an acoustic tag. The shark circled the boat several times and each time managed to stay just out of reach for the tag to be deployed.

After much anticipation and patience Enrico Gennari was able to place the transmitter on "Alek" just below the right side of the shark's dorsal fin. The team quickly pulled the anchor and began tracking the shark. Fingers were crossed that the shark would stay in the bay long enough to collect sufficient data.

Videos of the shark were also taken by the OCEANS team and loaded onto the internet for Alek to view. The OCEANS interns keep Alek updated with news and sightings of his shark. Since tagging "Alek", the research teams have encountered the shark nearly a half a dozen times around Seal Island and even witnessed the shark attack



Alek the shark from Mossel Bay, named after a little Canadian boy fighting Leukaemia.

book at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=41763822806>

Alek on Facebook

An excerpt from a typical posting found on Facebook reads:

"Hey Alek, I am one of the research students tracking your shark and just wanted to let you know about a little news. We were on the water the other day chumming around seal island and saw a bit of commotion a few hundred meters away. We quickly pulled anchor and saw that a shark was in the process of attacking a seal. As we came upon the action we saw the shark with a fresh tag just below the dorsal.

"We quickly put the tracking equipment in the water and confirmed that Alek the shark had just taken a seal!!! Pretty amazing stuff because sharks of Alek's size are typically not experienced enough to take down quick moving seals, so that is very exciting. After the quick meal Alek moved away from the island to rest and we hope to catch up with your shark this week. Take care buddy, Alek is a fighter just like you. We all send our hellos and well wishes."

Diary entries

Alek also has a brief online diary kept by his support group, which can be accessed at this group page on Facebook. Typical entries read:

"2009 - Alek has been doing well but he has missed out on a lot of treatments in the last couple of months due to low white blood cell counts and his triglycerides being too high. He has managed to get the fat levels down but there isn't much he can do to up his white blood cell count back up. He's got cute brown fuzz on his head and maybe soon he will have real hair again! He's doing very well with the home schooling and his spirits have been up."

"March 8 2009 - Alek has started getting schooled at home now and some parts of his life have been improving. He is still having bad times with the chemo but his spirits are high thanks to all of you. He was even feeling well enough to visit his friends in school last week and was welcomed warmly => Thank you ALL for the wonderful words and support!"

"16 January 2009 - Alek-



Alek, the 14-year-old boy fighting Leukaemia.

sander is now back in the hospital again. He is going through a ton of chemo and it has really hit him hard. He's not eating and he has stomach pains a lot. His mother was there with him last few days and now his grand-mother has taken over for the next couple of days so his Mom can get some time with her other children and sleep in a real bed. Natasa (Alek's Mom) will be driving up every day just not sleeping over. Then back there again for Sunday and Monday shifts."

Alek's family have requested for those who are interested to send Aleksander a message of hope on a post card. A post card is more personal and something that Alek can actually hold and look back on when he needs words of encouragement and strength. Alek is a brave boy who is fighting for his life. He has to undergo multitudes of tests and the horrible side effects of chemotherapy. Is it possible that we could spare a few moments out of our day to send a card showing support for Alek. How amazing must it feel to receive post cards and stamps from all over the world. Let's put a smile on his face and hope in his heart from Mossel Bay.

Aleksandar Djermanovic
6412 Armstrong Drive
Niagara Falls, Ontario
L2H 2G4 CANADA