

BAIT, BITES

and other matters

DO SHARK CAGE DIVING OPS DESERVE A BAD RAP? WE DELVE IN THE DEEP TO FIND THE ANSWER...

By Cindy Tilney

It's a misty morning off the Cape coast and I'm immersed in sea water, bobbing up and down behind the comforting bars of a steel cage suspended from a boat for this express purpose: up-close encounters with the ocean's most formidable predator, the Great White Shark. As the skipper gives a shout, we plunge beneath the surface for a glimpse of the new arrival – a dark mass of pure muscle that crystallises into clearer focus as it approaches. The shark is visible for only a matter of seconds before it doubles back with a single swish of its powerful tail and disappears into the green-blue haze, but it's enough time to be awed by its grace and beauty – an image deeply incongruous with the stereotype of the Great White as a man-eating monster.

White Shark cage diving has been a topic of hot debate since 1998, when a sudden spate of attacks spurred a backlash of government concern and public outrage, with critics claiming the industry was responsible for increased shark aggression towards humans, or concerned that it denoted cruelty to the creatures themselves. Operators maintain that the industry is more of a boon than a bane to all parties involved and in recent years, a number of researchers and conservationists have tentatively joined their camp.

"I don't see cage diving as problematic provided it's properly managed," says Peter Chadwick, manager of World Wildlife Fund's Honda Marine Parks Programme. "The model on which permits are issued is sustainable, the industry creates jobs and generates cash, and there's no evidence that it steps up the incidence of attacks. But there are good operators and bad operators – and while the good guys are very meticulous and truly concerned for the welfare of Great Whites, unscrupulous operators harm the industry as well as the sharks." He warns against 'fly-by-night'

operators who abuse the technique used to attract sharks, pulling them right into the cages for a bigger wow factor. "If sharks are wounded, they're more susceptible to infection – and this is just another risk these already-threatened animals have to face," he explains. Likewise, he's critical of skippers who allow sharks to take the bait time and again, allowing them access to a consistent reward factor and setting up the opportunity for conditioning to occur.

Marine scientist, Ryan Johnson, has been studying Great White Sharks for the last eight years. He has spent some of this time aboard cage-diving vessels, assessing their impact on the behaviour and well-being of sharks, and believes the industry is unlikely to play a role in the incidence of attacks. "Most sharks are transient, so they're not always in contact with cage divers, and when they do encounter boats they should only be getting the bait a small percentage of the time – so the chances of conditioning are fairly low. But even assuming conditioning does occur, it's more likely to be connected to the most powerful sensory stimuli – the boat or the chum – than the divers, who have a totally different shape and smell."

Johnson believes the industry's enormous potential for conservation overrides its

associated problems. "Cage divers have a vested interest in the sharks, and the industry means to constantly people out at sea with watch dogs – not just the operators, but the tourists," he says. "Cage diving gives the chance to see how bears are in the water, and this is a wave of international support. Rather than condemning or banning diving initiatives, Johnson believes environmentalists should work with operators in tackling problems."

Still, one question remains: what is the link between shark attacks between 1998 and 2004? Chadwick and Johnson believe that human pressure on the ocean is for the rise. "We're fishing the ocean to a greater extent so Great White numbers are dwindling; more people are out there's a higher chance of human meeting – these factors set up the conditions which shark attacks are more likely to occur," says Chadwick.

The good news is shark attacks have declined since around 2004, probably due to the work of shark spotters, as well as the industry providing insight into where sharks are most likely to be in hunting grounds.

Results of this research show that the favoured areas for shark attacks, some of which are even considered a way of communicating with the underwater world.

"There's a move towards free dive," says Peter Chadwick, who adds that strict controls will be needed to regulate the industry venture. "You only need a very tiny amount of bait, rather than putting loads of chum in the water, and 99% of the time guys are not getting attacked. People will happily go every day, but won't consider it a shark – which is ironic considering more sharks are being killed by humans."

