

One minute with...

Dorien Schröder

What do you do when a great white shark lands in your boat? We ask someone with first-hand experience

What were you doing out on a boat in shark-infested waters?

One of the projects I've been working on is the study of great white shark populations with an organisation called Oceans Research in South Africa. We go out on "chum trips", where we attract sharks to the boat with fish oils then take photos of their dorsal fins, which have distinct notches and patches. In this way, we can estimate the numbers of sharks in the area.

Tell me about the day you became shark bait

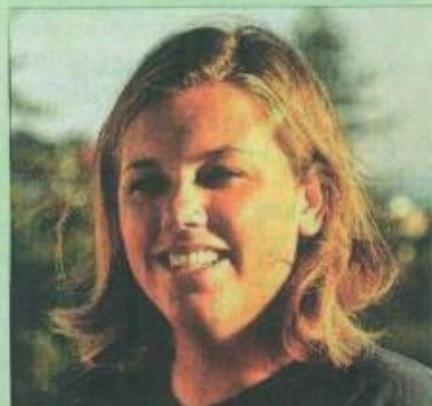
We went out on a chum trip and were anchored near Seal Island, which is where the great white sharks usually are in winter time. We had seen a few sharks, but it had gone quiet. Then I heard a splash behind me and turned around to see a great white hovering in the air next to one of the interns we had with us. She stepped away, because luckily she had seen the shark coming out of the water. I grabbed her hoodie and pulled her away from the shark as it landed in the boat.

How big was the shark?

She was about 3 metres long and weighed 500 to 600 kilograms. At first, she was panicking and thrashing around, but she ended up curled in a corner, calmed down. This was lucky because I was worried that she would hurt herself. We poured buckets of water over her gills so that she could breathe.

Had it crossed your mind that one of the sharks you had been studying might end up in your boat?

We'd talked about it now and then. Here in South Africa it is a normal occurrence for great white sharks to breach out of the water. We see it about once a week. It is one of the most beautiful things I have ever seen. Sometimes they breach when another shark is swimming underneath them and they get scared, which is what I think happened this day. The shark breached out of the water and didn't realise the boat was there until she landed on it.



PROFILE

Dorien Schröder is a principal investigator with Oceans Research in Mossel Bay, South Africa. She has a master's degree in oceanography from the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands.

How did you get the shark back in the water?

We called the port authorities for a crane to lift her back into the water. When she felt the water around her she started moving around, so we cut the ropes and she swam off. We were excited that she was so lively after being out of the water for over an hour.

You sounded as concerned for the shark as you were for yourself...

I was probably a little bit more concerned for the shark to be honest. Of course, the interns came first - I made sure they were all right. After that it was definitely the shark that was first priority. She was lucky to land in a boat full of people who love sharks.

Have you seen her since?

We have sent a picture of her dorsal fin to everyone doing shark research or tourism along the South African coast so they can keep a lookout for her, though no one has spotted her yet.

Has this put you off working with sharks?

Definitely not. I went out on a boat the next day.

Interview by Alison George

© 2011 AP/WIDEWORLD