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While most people are aware of the plight of the charismatic ocean creatures, like the dolphins and whales, few know, often blinded by misguided fears, of the shark's current fate. **Sharks are disappearing at an alarming rate – their numbers down by 90% in some regions** – with many species facing extinction during our lifetime. Last month, the IUCN released shocking statistics: over 1/3 of all shark species are threatened with extinction. Over one hundred million sharks will be killed this year. That's 11,432 every hour.

Few know about this issue, because it happens so far away from our daily lives. Out in the oceans for a reason that is foreign to many of us. But make no mistake, shark finning occurs everywhere as sharks are ruthlessly hunted for their valuable fins all over the world... even in the United States - and Hawaii.

And few of us care, as sharks have evolved into terrifying monsters that ironically, while often times fueling a mass hysteria, really only exist within our collective imagination. And thus, most share the inaccurate sentiment "the only good shark is a dead shark".

Say the word "shark" and most people immediately imagine a bloodthirsty monster worthy of a "Jaws" remake. As a society, there are few things we fear more than sharks, with shark attacks consistently ranking as one of the top three most-feared natural dangers in most studies. Dip a toe in the ocean and you will be torn limb from limb. This makes it difficult for many people to understand why sharks are worth saving – let alone take measures to do so. And thus, countless animals continue to disappear without us noticing or caring.

The frightening reality is, like them or not, sharks play a crucial role on this planet. Remove sharks from the oceans and we are tampering with our primary food and air sources. And the livelihoods of the millions that rely on the oceans for their main source of income. Sharks are a critical component in an ecosystem that provides 1/3 of our world's food source, produces more oxygen than all the rainforests combined, removes half of the atmosphere's manmade carbon dioxide (greenhouse gas), and controls our planet's temperature and weather.

As the apex predators of the oceans, the role of sharks is to keep other marine life in healthy balance and to regulate the world's largest and most important ecosystem. Remove sharks and that balance is seriously upset. One study in the U.S. indicates that the elimination of sharks resulted in the destruction of the shellfish industry in waters off the mid-Atlantic states of the United States, due to





the unchecked population growth of cow-nose rays, whose mainstay is scallops. Other studies in Belize have shown reef systems falling into extreme decline when the sharks have been over-fished, destroying an entire ecosystem.

And while there are many ways to save these animals from extinction, a critically important tool for shark conservationists is shark diving. Not only does it prove sharks are more valuable alive rather than dead both economically and also environmentally but it shifts people's perspectives on a mal-aligned and often despised species. It challenges collective misconceptions. It brings awareness to an issue few know much about. And ultimately, it help ensures the sharks' survival.

Shark diving is incredibly valuable in the purest sense of the definition - as sharks contribute a significant amount of revenue and provide countless jobs. Tiger shark diving in Aliwal Shoal, South Africa generated an estimated \$1.8 million during 2007, while white shark cage diving in Gansbaai, South Africa generates approximately \$28.9 million yearly. It has been estimated that each individual Caribbean reef shark in the Bahamas is worth about \$150,000 to the Bahamian economy each and every year. In the Maldives it is roughly estimated that shark watching generates \$ 2.3 million per year in direct diving revenue. Live sharks and shark diving mean tourists, jobs and money. And that is recurring income – not one time income when a shark is killed.

Admittedly, shark diving is not without its controversy, though unfounded. Many people assume that baiting sharks leads to an increase in shark attacks, as sharks become more comfortable with human beings and also, associate them with food. Others contend that altering a sharks' natural behavior is causing both the sharks' and humans' issues. However, scientific evidence proves otherwise. One study published in South Africa which examined the impact of cage diving on sharks' behavior determined with scientific data that concerns surrounding changing sharks behaviors and increasing shark attacks are unfounded (Laroche et al, 2007, "Effects of provisioning ecotourism activity on the behaviour of white sharks".)

Often those who claim that by putting sharks in the water with human beings and food, sharks are turned into voracious, man-eating monsters are driven by misinformation and fear. Indeed, it is wrong to generalize about sharks – the last fifty years of science has proven otherwise. Humans are not on the menu of any shark – and sharks are intelligent enough to discern what is their food. Sharks are intelligent and generally afraid of people. Incidents are usually a result of mistaken identities. Of the over 500 species of sharks, less than 5% have been linked to any of those incidents. No scientific evidence suggests anything to the contrary.





As responsible conservationists, we do realize these are wild animals and that there is some risk involved to both the divers and the animals when stepping into their habitat and even changing that habitat with chum and bait. With proper safety protocols, appropriate legislation, and guidance from reputable dive operations, the risk is small when compared to the reward of an up-close encounter with one of the great co-inhabitants of our earth. And, Shark Savers believes the reward far outweighs the risk. Diving with sharks enables people to develop a healthy respect and even compassion for a seriously misunderstood animal that is critical to the health of our oceans.

People tend to protect the things we understand, and sharks are largely out of sight, out of mind for us. Allowing people to get into the water with sharks and come face to face with these magnificent animals is one of the most powerful conservation tools we have to protect them.

Sadly, Hawaii represents one of only a few places remaining where people can still go to experience the magnificence of the sharks underwater. As we continue to deplete populations and chase sharks to the brink of extinction, it is more important than ever to get people into the water safely and responsibly to experience and gain an appreciation for their true character. It would be a travesty for state legislation to eliminate this opportunity in Hawaii – not just locally, for sharks and conservationists alike, but for our oceans and our planet.

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