

# Shark Research Institute

## Member Newsletter



Shark Research Institute Global Headquarters

70 Heather Lane • Princeton, NJ 08540 • USA • Phone: 609-921-3522 • Fax: 609-921-1505

### The Peter Benchley Shark Conservation Awards



Left to right: The Award winners: Jason Holmberg, Sonja Fordham, and Rob Stewart. Also pictured are Wendy Benchley and SRI president Stan Waterman.

SRI created the Peter Benchley Shark Conservation Awards to honor the memory of the late Peter Benchley, and spotlight those who are working internationally to protect sharks as valuable ocean resources. The Awards were presented on May 8, 2007, at the famed Explorers Club in New York. The gala event was attended by the Benchley family, Explorer Club and SRI members, marine conservationists, celebrities, and friends.

The Awards were presented in three divisions: Science, Advocacy and Media, and included grants totaling \$4,500.

- Ecocean, a web-based project, utilizes a pattern-recognition algorithm to identify individual whale sharks based on their body patterns, much like fingerprints. Winner of the Rolex Award for Enterprise, this non-invasive unique research tool monitors the global movements and population size of these highly-migratory and threatened sharks, and encourages public participation. The Ecocean Whale Shark Photo-identification Library is a joint

project developed by programmer Jason Holmberg, marine biologist Brad Norman, and NASA scientist Zaven Arzoumanian.

- Sonja Fordham, Shark Conservation Program Director for the Ocean Conservancy, Policy Director of the Brussels-based Shark Alliance and Deputy Chair for the IUCN (World Conservation Union) Shark Specialist Group, works to bridge the gap between shark scientists and policy makers. A tireless advocate of shark conservation for the past 15 years, Fordham serves as an advisor to state and federal governments and has led efforts to ban finning and limit shark catch in US waters and adjacent seas.

- *Sharkwater*, an internationally-acclaimed documentary film by Rob Stewart, is visually stunning. The film exposes the exploitation and corruption surrounding shark populations in the marine reserves of Cocos Island, Costa Rica and the Galapagos Islands. To protect sharks, Stewart teams up with conservationist Paul Watson of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society, and the two men risk their lives to show viewers that what is happening in the world's oceans can no longer be ignored. *Sharkwater*, which has been compared to *An Inconvenient Truth*, will premiere in theaters across the USA in September 2007.

Peter Benchley was much more than the Shark Research Institute's benefactor, a colleague and friend, he was an eloquent advocate for shark conservation. In the 1970s, Benchley's fictional best-seller, *Jaws* — which Spielberg made into a blockbuster movie — generated a fear of sharks simply because so little was known about them. By the 1980s, that fear had given way to curiosity, resulting in an unprecedented amount of research on sharks. In the 1990s, as sharks became target species for Asian markets, scientific data were available to combat threats to sharks — data which existed because of the fascination in sharks that Peter had sparked. Throughout his life, Peter remained a spokesman for sharks and an ardent shark conservationist.

**Oceanblue Divers host benefit for SRI  
AND launch campaign to end  
consumption of shark in New York City**

On May 9, Oceanblue Divers, New York City's largest and fastest-growing dive club, hosted an exclusive screening of the award-winning documentary *Sharkwater* to benefit the Shark Research Institute. The sold-out event, held at the AMC E-Walk Theater in Times Square, also featured presentations by Rob Stewart, Director of *Sharkwater*, Dean Fessler of SRI, and Michael Feld, founder of Oceanblue Divers, plus an after party with open bar at Home, a Chelsea nightclub.

At the same time, Oceanblue Divers launched a campaign to end the consumption of sharks and sharkfin soup throughout New York City.

Shark finning is the brutal practice of catching sharks, slicing off their fins and dumping the live sharks back in the ocean to drown or bleed to death. Although shark fins are tasteless and laden with high levels of toxic methyl-mercury, shark fin soup costs as much as \$100 per bowl, making it a status symbol in some Asian cultures, and the high demand for shark fins by Asian markets drives a shadowy multi-billion dollar industry second in size only to the illegal drug trade.

"Until relatively recently, poachers hunted elephants for their tusks, leaving the rest of the animal to rot," said Feld. "Worldwide outcry, conservation efforts and enforcement brought elephants back from the edge of extinction. We can only hope that the world will wake up and save sharks."

Oceanblue Divers seeks to:

- *Raise awareness about threats to sharks.* Sharks have inhabited the earth's oceans for 400 million years, but overfishing in the last 20 years has decimated some shark populations by as much as 90%.
- *Reduce demand for shark fins through education.* The demand for shark fin soup is at an all-time high, but consumers are largely unaware of the origins of shark fin and have little understanding of overfishing, illegal shark finning or the health hazards associated with shark fin soup.
- *End the practice of shark finning globally.* The high profit margins of illegal shark finning (a multi-billion dollar industry) have pushed fishermen into fragile marine reserves, such as the Galapagos Islands and Costa Rica's Cocos Island.
- *Promote ecology-based tourism and shark diving*

as viable economic alternatives to shark finning. Tourism dollars from scuba divers and other travelers interested in observing sharks in their natural habitat can infuse far more money into communities over the long term than short-term gains from shark fishing.

The first objective of the campaign is to seek a ban on consumption of shark fin soup in New York City. One of the first steps to achieve this goal is an educational presence at the Taiwanese street fair to be held Sunday May 20, noon to 5 pm at 17th Street and Park Avenue (Union Square Park North), and SRI members in Manhattan are encouraged to assist. Also planned is a web site to list NYC locations that sell shark products; and engaging the office of the Mayor to become an official supporter of the campaign.

The Animal Welfare Institute has also posted a list of restaurants selling shark fin soup in the Washington, D.C. area. They ask SRI members in the area to contact the restaurants and ask them to remove the dishes from their menu — and tell them why. To view the AWI list, go to:

[http://www.awionline.org/oceans/news/DC\\_restaurants\\_shark-finsoup.htm](http://www.awionline.org/oceans/news/DC_restaurants_shark-finsoup.htm)



**Thank You to our Supporters!**

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## Expeditions

Spaces for sport divers are available on the following expeditions. Please note: These are *not* dive vacations; they are research expeditions. Divers will assist SRI scientists to gather and record data. To reserve a space or obtain more details, go to: [www.sharks.org/expeditions](http://www.sharks.org/expeditions)

### Whale Sharks

**July 23-27 & 27-31** Holbox, Mexico, Expedition leader, Doc Anes, \$1,500 per diver

**December 15-22** LaPaz, Mexico. Expedition leader: Dr. Alex Antoniou. \$1,350 per diver

**December 2007-March 2008** Tanzania & Northern Mozambique Channel, aboard the oceanographic vessel *Kairos*. Expedition leader, Matt Potenski. Watch our website for dates & costs

**March 3-13, 2008** Donsol, Philippines. Expedition leader, Marie Levine, \$1,887 per diver

### White Sharks

**August 10-15 & October 12-18** Guadalupe Island aboard the *Sea Escape*. Expedition leader, Dean Fessler. \$2,600 to \$2,900 per diver

**August 25-29, September 1-5, September 22-29 September 29- October 3, and October 6-10** Guadalupe Island aboard the *Andrea Lynn*. Dean Fessler will lead the October 6-10 expedition. \$2,650 per diver

## Georgia Aquarium Whale Sharks

Two more whale sharks are expected to arrive at the Georgia Aquarium from Taiwan next month, raising



*Whale shark in Georgia Aquarium*

the number of whale sharks at the aquarium to five. In January 2007 the death of Ralph, one of the aquarium's first two whale sharks, was thought to be related to the use of a chemical in the tank to prevent parasites.

The cause of death on May 13 of Yu-chan, a 5.4-metre female whale shark, in Osaka's aquarium, has not been determined.

## NC Scallop Beds Decimated

Depletion of large sharks in the northwestern Atlantic has led to the destruction of the bay scallop fishery along parts of the Eastern seaboard. A study by Ransom A. Myers of Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and colleagues, documents the cascading effects that the loss of a top predator can have on a marine ecosystem. In the absence of large sharks the skates and rays that they feed upon have thrived. In turn, the study shows that one of the middle links in the food chain, the cownose ray, has become more abundant and has devastated scallop beds in North Carolina, wiping out the industry.

"Large sharks have been functionally eliminated from the east coast of the (United States), meaning that they can no longer perform their ecosystem role as top predators," reports Julia Baum of Dalhousie University. The study, published in the journal *Science*, combined long-term data on shark, skate and ray populations, and showed the impact cownose rays can have on scallops. Pete Peterson, a marine biologist at the University of North Carolina and an author of the paper, said the rays practically denude scallop beds during their end-of-summer southward migration along the Eastern seaboard. The timing is such that the scallops are devoured before they have a chance to reproduce. "Cownose rays aren't so wise in their sustainable use of the resource," he said. "They eat [the scallops] before they've spawned."

Dr. Peterson also noted that the cownose ray was just one of 12 midlevel species that the study showed were becoming more abundant because of the disappearance of sharks. "There's another 11 out there doing who knows what," he said.

## Shark Fin Soup off the Menu

The Tung Wag hospital group, Hong Kong's oldest and largest charitable organization, has decided to stop serving shark-fin soup at their banquets because of concerns about the world's declining shark population. The group holds about 30 banquets a year for fund-raising and charity galas. Both Hong Kong Disneyland and the University of Hong Kong dropped shark-fin soup from their menus in 2005, but the Hong Kong government has so far refused requests from environmentalists to scrap the dish from banquets for visiting dignitaries.

Shark Research Institute  
P.O. Box 40  
Princeton, NJ 08540  
U.S.A.



Non-Profit Organization  
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Princeton, NJ 08540

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## THE GOOD NEWS . . . . . AND THE BAD

The Mexican government has published sweeping new regulations and protections for sharks, including a shark finning ban, an extension of the moratorium on new commercial shark fishing permits, and extensive protection for white sharks, whale sharks, basking sharks and manta rays.

Shark-based tourism is growing rapidly in Mexico. It is one of the few places on the planet where whale sharks aggregate (Holbox and LaPaz) and white sharks make seasonal appearances (Isla Guadalupe). Other species, such as the giant Pacific manta rays, attract thousands of divers to Mexican waters.



A critical habitat for the endangered grey nurse shark off the mid-north coast of New South Wales will be protected by the Australian Government. The population was decimated in the 1960s by spearfishers, anglers and commercial fishing. Today, less than 500 of the sharks remain off the east coast of Australia.

All forms of fishing will be banned from the popular Cod Grounds off Laurieton on May 28, 2007 when the 300 hectare area becomes an official marine reserve. The NSW Government will be responsible for enforcing the new restrictions and the commonwealth is buying out several commercial fishing operations which worked the area.

There is nothing wrong with building a successful business — so long as doesn't harm the rest of the world. But Jack Ma, CEO of Alibaba.com is doing just that — and with help from Yahoo!

Jack Ma founded Alibaba.com, the largest online marketplace in China and one of the largest online traders of seafood products, including shark fin. This lucrative market for shark fin is creating huge incentives in poor nations — as represented by scores of shark fin traders on Alibaba.com — to further deplete the ocean's shark populations

Alibaba was asked *repeatedly* to stop facilitating the trade in shark fins and provided with data documenting the damage that removal of sharks is having to the ocean ecosystem.

Instead of doing the right thing, Jack Ma has started promoting himself as an environmentalist on such sites as CNN, an attempt to put himself in a league with Al Gore and environmentally-responsible CEOs. As a web-based business gateway, Alibaba.com is a partner to shark finning — as is Yahoo which owns a 40% stake in Alibaba and has a 35% voting control.

### OCEAN ENEMY



**JACK MA**  
CEO, Alibaba.com

For Aiding & Abetting the  
Destruction of the Marine Ecosystem  
and



His Accomplice