

# The Scuba Sports Club of Westchester, New York

Our 45th year serving the local and northeast dive community !

## The Scuba Sport Club's Spring 2020 Newsletter



**The Anchor Line**  
Al Miller, President

**Gary Lehman, Newsletter Editor**



**Welcome to the Spring 2020 issue of The Scuba Sports Club Sea Swells!** We invite all members of the diving community to contribute; please contact Gary at [gary.a.lehman@gmail.com](mailto:gary.a.lehman@gmail.com) with your

articles and photos! Our Club Newsletter includes features about our Club's diving and social calendar; our diving adventures, social/educational events, occasional equipment and health issue discussions, and profiles on some of the more colorful and intrepid characters in our local diving community (of which there are many!), and other features of interest.

**JUST TAKE A LOOK AT THE DIVE CALENDAR ON Page 4. WOW. Just WOW. Hats off to our Dive Planner \*\*\* Jack Ricotta \*\*\* !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!**

In this issue we go to Cozumel; Little Cayman; Djibouti (Africa); The Explorers Club to see Jill Heinerth, and see the biographical film about environmental activist Amos Nachoum and Sea Stories 2019; marvel at the 2019 photography contest winning photos; meet our 2019 Diver of the Year; learn about whale sharks; renew our commitment to dive training; get spec'd up on the new Plastic Bag Waste Reduction Act which went into effect March 1; read a compelling recommendation to consider the commitment to environmental preservation of the dive resorts we stay at; get an update on shark finning legislation and balloon release—and learn about the cruelties of salmon farming in the American Northwest.

So find the articles of interest to you, then relax and enjoy — and make your plans, envision your dive adventures, and make all your dreams come true — with... **The Scuba Sports Club !**

Gary  
Sea Swells Newsletter Editor



As we begin a new year and decade, I am looking back at the dedicated folks who brought us to where we are today. I cannot thank those volunteers enough for the time and effort that they put in to bring us up-to-date with everything from membership, social events, education and technology.

As we prepare for the upcoming dive season, it is time to inspect, service or perhaps upgrade our gear. It is always recommended to practice skills and advance certifications in the sport. We have several members who are instructors and would be happy to assist you in that regard.

Our first membership meeting has recently concluded and it was heartening to see the participation of our members. All scuba divers are family—but our club members are as tight as family can be. We have a number of social events that we enjoy together and the several opportunities to participate in dive trips organized throughout the year.

I look forward to all of the activities planned and to blowing bubbles with you in 2020.

Al Miller  
President



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## TSSC CLUB OFFICERS and DIRECTORS 2020

( ...We always welcome our Club membership to join our leadership team !!! )

President	Al Miller
Vice President	Ed Van Dolsen
Secretary	Michelle Memoli
Membership	Kevin Cushing
Dive Planning	Jack Ricotta
Treasurer	Sheri Buchman
Program Director	Amanda Slattery
Director at Large	Gene Miceli
Executive Director	Kenneth Salstrom
Past President	Denise Blais
Newsletter	Gary Lehman
Environment and Legislative	Judy Keznord
Safety and Education	Nick Lappano
Social Director	Liza Handziak
Webmaster	Gene Miceli
Legal Advisor	Robert Schragger
Founder	Zig Zigahn
Co-Founder	Soliman Shenouda

Kevin



Ed



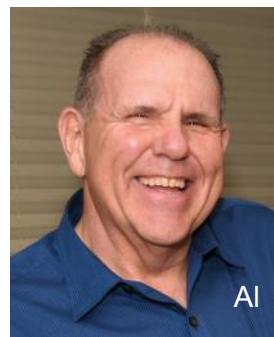
Michelle



Amanda



Gene



Al



Sheri



Jack



Kenny



Nick



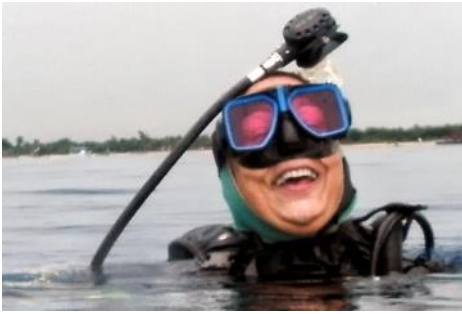
Gary



J-U-D-Y



Liz



**Club Dive Trips —  
Club 'Deco' Events  
Dive Planning Calendar for 2020**

***What's on the radar !***  
**Jack Ricotta, Dive Planner**



<b>Event</b>	<b>Club Contact</b>	<b>Date</b>
<b>50th Wappinger Creek, Water Derby Earth Day @ NY Botanical Gardens</b>	Liza Handziak	April 25; April 22—26
<b>Roatan Largest Int'l TSSC dive trip ever !</b>	Jack Ricotta	April 25-May 2
Riverkeeper Cleanup Hudson River	Judy	May 4
Dutch Springs Dive Expo	Liza Handziak	June 6
Summer BBQ !	Liza Handziak	TBD
<b>Socorro Island Vortex Liveaboard</b>	Jack Ricotta	June 15-25
<b>Deco Stop 'Las Mananitas'</b>	Liza Handziak	TBD
<b>North Carolina Graveyard of the Atlantic</b>	Jack Ricotta	July 30-Aug 3
<b>Florida Key's Wreck Trek II</b>	Jack Ricotta	August (dates TBD)
<b>Sea of Cortez/Midriff Islands Quino el Guardian Liveaboard</b>	Jack Ricotta	Sept 13-20
Environmental Protection Reservoir Cleanup	Liza Handziak	TBD
<b>Explorers Club, Nov 9. Bunny Bingo. Holiday Party. NYC Christmas Lights</b>	Liza Handziak	TBD

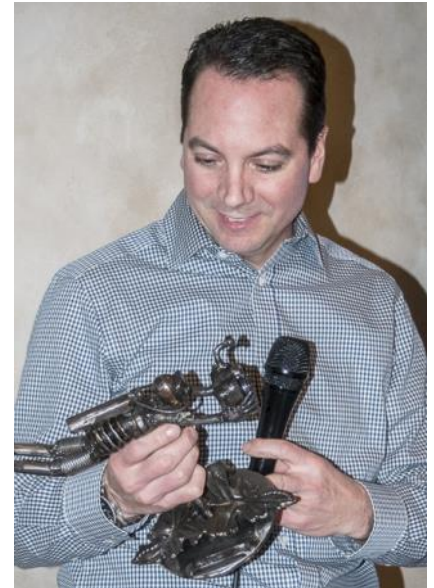




ANNOUNCING...

**The Scuba Sports Club 2020  
DIVER OF THE YEAR !!!**

Al Miller



It is my pleasure to announce Gene Miceli as the recipient of The Scuba Sports Club’s “Diver of the Year” for 2019.

Gene has given of his time on the Board Of Directors for the last 2-3 years. He has been instrumental in putting together a survey for our members in an effort to improve communication and expectations from the Board. In times of need, Gene has stepped up to provide stability for our club in order to move ahead and flourish.

Over the years, he has been involved in environmental issues by organizing and attending cleanups in Westchester County.

Gene is an avid diver. He always participates in local, domestic and international dive trips. Where assistance to fellow divers is needed, we can count on Gene to help. He has endeavored to continue his education and skills as a diver.

When our club suffered a devastating loss on an international dive trip, Gene was the member who worked with the local officials and the family to ease the stress of the unfortunate occurrence.

Gene is most deserving of the “Diver of the Year” recognition.

Please join me in congratulating Gene Miceli , The Scuba Sports Club “Diver of the Year”



**Beneath The Sea ! New Date 10/9-11 Meadowlands Expo Center**

Gene will be presented with **The Scuba Sports Club Diver of the Year Award** at BTS on the evening of Oct 10th. Please join us to cheer Gene as he receives this distinguished award !

BTS will be held at 355 Plaza Drive (Harmon Meadow) in Secaucus. It is THE annual diving event and vendors, artists, community leaders, dive boats, services providers, equipment manufacturers, and travel destination providers and liveaboard operators will all be in attendance. And of course, TSSC will have our booth and please stop by or, if you are a member, Volunteer to staff the booth ! Ed Van Dolsen can assist with those arrangements. AND, bring all the lunch money you have squirreled away because, trust us, you will expend all your slush funds for stuff that, believe me, you really DO need !!! And there are captivating and richly informative education sessions/seminars — and so many places/opportunities to expand the reach and range of your enjoyment of our most beloved sport ! Not to mention the International Underwater Film Festival, and the support for the signal initiatives of BTS towards marine careers for kids, Ocean Pals, and advancing environmental awareness, so sorely needed in this era of global climate change (read degradation). And.. To meet up with the Rich and Famous and the Poor working stiffs who are the fabric of our lives together getting wet and on our surface intervals !

## The Scuba Sports Club At LIDA 2020

... Ed Van Dolsen



Every winter, the members of the Scuba Sports Club make a pilgrimage to Long Island to attend the Long Island Divers Association Film Festival (LIDA). This year was no exception. The date was January 25 and the location was Hofstra University. As usual, we had a large group of 15 TSCC members, despite missing some of our regulars due to a dive trip to Cozumel.

The agenda and presentations were excellent. Some of the highlights included:

- Jill Heinerth, a pioneering underwater explorer and filmmaker presented, "Under Thin Ice: Documenting the Changing Arctic." Heinerth's presentation documented the dwindling ice in the Arctic, both above and below the water. Her fantastic photography and a riveting narrative made the topic come to life and provided a wake-up call for all of us. Heinerth was also available to sign copies of her book, "Into the Planet." It was an excellent chance to talk diving with one of the world's greatest tech divers and photographers.

-Michael Salvarezza and Christopher Weaver, very experienced divers and photographers, presented "Tubbataha: Coral Kingdom of the South Seas." Salvarezza and Weaver brought the pristine coral reefs and fascinating sea creatures of the Philippines to life for us all.

-Michael Labrecque and Julie Ovimet, seasoned tech divers and filmmakers, presented "Visions of Indonesia," two short films on Kerajaan and Komodo. These wonderful films captured the stunning beauty of Indonesia diving and sea life. Labrecque and Ovimet also discussed the on-going efforts to protect these waters that included a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Other excellent presentations included:

-Danny Rivera presented "One Island" about diving in and around Long Island. Rivera showed that there is a lot great diving right here in our own backyard. Let's get out there and take advantage of it!

-Kirk Kurkometis, presented "XP-47B Thunderbolt" which documented his search for a rare XP-47B Thunderbolt, a World War II fighter plane, lost in the Long Island Sound on its maiden flight on August 2, 1942. Fascinating search for a rare plane.

-Ashely Dacosta and Ryan Christie presented "The Symphony of the Deep: Exploring the North and South Air Atolls of Maldives." Dacosta and Christie did an excellent job of documenting the beauty of the Maldives.

-Finally, Maureen and Stephen Langevin presented on the wreck of the Lizzie D, the rumrunner that sank off the coast of Long Island in 1922. It was a very interesting presentation. If you're lucky, you can still find an intact bottle of whisky!

The presentations were followed by a nice get-together where we all had a chance to get some dinner and talk about diving. A good time was had by all.



## Little Cayman Island with TSSC October 6-13, 2019

Al Miller



I arranged to pick up Jack Ricotta, Ed van Dolsen and Amanda Slattery for our drive to JFK on the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup>. Unfortunately, Amanda had to cancel her participation in this trip. She was not the only cancellation as Lada and Judy Simek were forced to do the same. Our club trip was now down to seven which included Bob Cofer, Sharon Behnke, Jack Ricotta, Ed Van Dolsen, Vinnie Fattizzi, Al Miller and new member Will Torres.

Our drive to JFK was uneventful. As we entered Terminal 1 for Cayman Airways, there was an eerie feeling as it was nearly deserted. I guess that we were a bit early since the terminal had not yet opened. Trying to find a cup of coffee was fruitless.

As the remainder of our group assembled, we discussed the excitement of our trip to Little Cayman. For some, it was their first time but for others, it was a return engagement.

Once arriving in Grand Cayman, passing through Customs and re-entering the airport for our flight to Little Cayman, we were reminded that this would be aboard a De Havilland Otter which offered little in comfort but a great deal toward safety.

At the airport in Little Cayman, we were advised that some of our luggage did not make the flight and would be aboard the next one in the evening. As usual, I had to sweat it out (literally because I was in long pants and shirt and my clothes were among the missing) but fortunately my clothes and gear arrived hours later.

Our rooms were nicely renovated since my last TSSC trip here years before. As we settled in and met at the bar for a drink, we made planned dive buddies, went over our equipment and waited for the dinner bell to ring.

As I remembered, the all-inclusive meals were excellent the entire week. Kudos to the chef and staff that were eager to serve us.

The assigned dive boat for the week was the *Island Dreamer* with the crew of Simon and Steve. Between most dives, our captain Simon, would entertain us with his best jokes. We shared the boat with Chris & Amy Lanaux (Arkansas), Cynthia Johnson (Massachusetts), Jim Romeika (New York) and Mike & Kelly Wilhelm, our newest members from Oklahoma. Jim wore a bright orange wetsuit and was buddied up with Sharon. Several times we heard people tell him his suit was on inside out but, it wasn't. I guess he wanted to make a statement.

Our days consisted of three dives per day except for Saturday which was a two-tank morning dive in order to observe the "No Fly" rule. Several of us were excited to do the night dives on Tuesday and Thursday but sea conditions prevented our boat passage (continued next page...)



## Little Cayman Island with TSSC October 6-13, 2019

Al Miller



through the narrow reef opening in the dark. Our patience was finally rewarded with a night dive on Friday.

On most dives, we were greeted by nurse sharks, an occasional reef shark, turtles and rays. Grouper were abundant and usually accompanied us as a puppy would. What seemed to be in short supply were moray eels with very few making an appearance.

Our special night on the island was Karaoke night. The Scuba Sports Club was the predominant act but, we managed to get most at the bar to participate. Kelly Wilhelm who claimed that she would not perform, decided that her voice was no worse than the rest of us and sang many songs. She was particularly inspired by a song from Queen. Meanwhile, Jordan--a young lady from Jacksonville FL, dazzled us with her performance of a rap song. Not only did she know all of the words, she had the voice, looks and the moves to go along with it.

Sunday morning was time to pack, leave our luggage at the room door and prepare for the Otter flight back to the main island. At Grand Cayman airport, TSSC said goodbye to our new members and friends prior to our flights home.







# Little Cayman Island with TSSC October 6-13, 2019

Al Miller





## The Scuba Sports Club Dives Cozumel!

Jan 23-27, 2020

Al Miller



The Scuba Sports Club kicked off 2020 with a 5-day trip to Cozumel. Thanks again to Jack Ricotta for putting together a great trip to shake off the winter blues. Taking advantage of this trip were Sheri Buchman, John Frercks, Jack Ricotta, Stephanie Hernandez, Al Miller, Judy Dronzek, Gene Miceli and some of our newest members Ken Andreu, Wally Dietrich and Mike Wilhelm.

Our accommodations at the Iberostar Resort were handled through Caradonna Dive Adventures who also arranged the diving through Dressel Divers.

After all waivers were completed and cert cards verified, we were privileged to have our own vessel, the Palancar Diver. Our D/Ms were Jose and Rodrigo with a substitute of Eva for the second day.

The diving, as always, was drifting with the current. At times, it was swift but moderate on some sites. Our D/Ms led us through numerous swim throughs as we navigated the reefs. Turtles were often present with an occasional Eagle Ray gliding past us. Their beauty and grace never grow old.

On our third day of diving, we were reminded of the unfortunate passing of Paul Alessi on the Palancar Caves site in 2016. In honor of our fallen TSSC member, we placed a small memorial on the reef to him. The site was beautiful, and it seemed that the several turtles here were joining us to pay our respects.

The final dive of the trip found us on the C-53 (AKA—Felipe Xicoténcatl). This was a US Mine Sweeper sold to Mexico to combat drug trafficking. It was sunk in 1999 as an artificial reef and for the pleasure of scuba divers. For those willing to do a full penetration of the three levels of this wreck, we were greeted by hundreds of lobsters on the lowest level.

At the conclusion of this trip, we said goodbye to Mike Wilhelm who was traveling back home to Oklahoma as the rest of us were heading back to Atlanta for our connecting flights. Unfortunately, we experienced a 1 ½ hour delay departing Cozumel which did not affect most of us but sadly caused Sheri and John to miss their connection back to Newark.

Once again, thanks to Jack for his continued efforts to provide TSSC with great dive opportunities throughout the year.



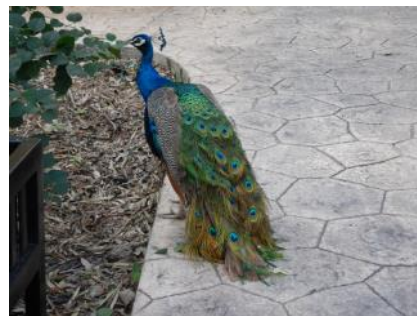
# The Scuba Sports Club Dives Cozumel!

Jan 23-27, 2020

Al Miller



## Photos from the dive trip !





# The Scuba Sports Club Dives Cozumel!

Jan 23-27, 2020

Al Miller



## Photos from the dive trip !





## Jill Heinerth — Explorers Club December 9, 2019

Amanda Slattery



Jill Heinerth is a cave diver, underwater explorer, writer, photographer and filmmaker. She was the first Explorer-in – Residence of The Royal Canadian Geographic Society and is a member of the Explorers Club, New York. Her 2019 book *Into the Planet - My Life as a Cave Diver* - has taken her on a book tour of the USA. On December 9, 2019 she gave a presentation entitled “Under Thin Ice – Documenting the changing Arctic.” The presentation was preceded by refreshments, beer and wine, cheese and crackers, but a few members met for dinner at a local restaurant first. James Kafka did the research and discovered Bella Blu on Lexington Avenue around the corner from the Explorers Club. It was good, so make a note of this for future Explorers Club visits.

Jill gives an excellent presentation. Her dives in the frigid water under the Arctic are challenging and fraught with danger. While documenting the thickness of the ice there is always the possibility that the hole or break in the ice through which she entered the water will freeze over disorienting her and blocking her exit. Somehow she must find her way back to the support vessel and be able to surface. Jill finds holes deep inside icebergs, tunnels through which she can swim and film. On one occasion conditions did not allow her to get all the footage she needed in a single dive. Air ran low, she exited the water and planned to return the next day to complete filming. Then the iceberg collapsed.

Not least among the dangers is the wildlife. Once, she was diving completely oblivious to a polar bear which was above her at an angle where she could not see him. Very fortunately he allowed her to exit the water safely. The topside crew watched the entire event.

Asked if she experiences fear as she tackles this unique environment she replies yes, but the many safety protocols serve her in good stead, she will not let the fear deter her and she will keep on exploring.





## Continuing Education for Divers

Nick Lappano



In addition to diving frequently, another way to improve as a diver is to participate in additional training. The beginning of a new year is a good time to make a plan for the next training which you want to take whether it is to go to the next level as a diver or taking some specialty course which interests you. Everyone should have been certified as an Open Water Diver which allows you to dive without being under the direct supervision of a dive professional (Dive Master or Instructor). But your OW C-card is only the start.

Usually the next step is to get your Advanced Open Water certification. This will be needed to dive deeper than 60 feet (not exceeding the recreational depth of 130 feet) as well as making other more challenging dives. Many dives in popular dive destinations require an AOW certification. If you don't have it, you may have to sit out the dive or obtain the services (and absorb the cost) of a dive master to accompany you. There are no prerequisites for this course and many divers sign up for it as soon as they feel comfortable with their basic diving capabilities. You should feel confident in your basic skills as instructors teaching this course will not be reviewing those.

Nitrox (enriched air) certification will train you in the safe use of air containing more than 21% oxygen. (up to 40%). Use of Nitrox can extend your bottom time OR provide an additional safety factor in avoiding DCS. Many divers claim that they just "feel better" when using Nitrox. If you plan on doing multiple repetitive dives on a trip Nitrox is strongly recommended.

Rescue Diver, which includes First Response Training, trains you in ways to assist other Divers in situations not covered by OW and AOW training. Many divers look back at this as one of the most eye opening and useful of all their training courses.

(If you previously took first response training when getting certified as a Rescue Diver, the First Response training expired after two years so you may want to take the first response training again. Protocols are always changing which require this training to be redone periodically.)

Master Scuba Diver is the highest non-professional, recreational level of diving. Different criteria apply depending upon the agency. It is sort of cool to be able to write yourself down on a manifest list as a MASTER Scuba Diver.

Do you want to go beyond recreational diving and participate in more challenging dives which exceed the training offered in recreational diving? Then technical diving aka "Tec" diving may be the way for you to go. By being specially trained in decompression diving and the use of mixed gases and sophisticated equipment (among other skills) you will be able to explore areas inaccessible to recreational divers. With this type of diving the risks are exponentially greater than those in Recreational diving so it is imperative that you do not do any Tec diving or use any gear intended for use by a Tec diver without the proper training and experience.

Maybe you want to go down the professional path by becoming a dive master, assistant instructor or instructor. Imagine the satisfaction which you may feel by being able to introduce others to an activity which you are so passionate about.

Of course, there are also a plethora of specialties, both in the recreational and technical realms of diving. Check with your dive shop/professional to determine which of these may best suit your diving interests. The key point of this is the more knowledge you have the better and safer diver you will be. Dive often and dive safely.



## New York State Bag Waste Reduction Act

Judy K

**In an effort to reduce single use plastic bags the Plastic Bag Ban (Article 27, Title 28); takes effect March 1, 2020 and prohibits the distribution of plastic carryout bags by certain retailers in New York state. So please bring your own bag !!**

New York's Department of Environmental Conservation has created a public education effort, called #BYOBAGNY, essentially asking shoppers to build a new habit: bringing reusable bags.

Proponents say that it will soon become a reflex which will help reduce single use plastics. As we all know how it negatively effects the environment!

So look around your house for plastic bags, canvas or other suitable bags you can use. If you don't have any you can typically find them at the grocery store for sale. While we are on the topic to reduce plastics, try to reuse the produce bags too. But every time you grab your bag you're saving sea life!

So thanks for BYObag!





## Dive Into Action: Vacation at Earth-Friendly Places!

Judy K



( Ecology Flag ! )

Most divers love to go places to dive into the beautiful waters in a new location. We search for the locations and book the trip based on the sites and types of species we might see at that time of year. However, most of us fail to find out if the resorts or hotels we are staying are earth friendly.

It was a refreshing change being at the Iberostar in Cozumel Mexico; they have made a huge industry stance toward what they call the “Wave of Change”. Basically, that is a worldwide marketing campaign to show their guests that the Iberostar organization is making efforts towards serving certified sustainable seafood, reducing single use plastics and contributing towards the protection and restoration of coral reefs. It makes me feel good that I’m not adding to the problem with my vacation but learning to change my own ways when I get back home. It turns out that reducing the throw away plastics (no straws, no throw away plastic water bottles, no soaps wrapped in plastic film, no toiletries in small bottles) was hardly noticeable. Only exception for me was remembering to filling up the glass bottle with drinking water, but even that was easy to get used to doing. The resort makes the efforts to be more responsible, as it helps to get vacationers into the mindset to do the same. It really is a change of habit when your reminded of all the waste that each one of us can save.

Seeking to go to locations which are aligned with your own desires and outlook on the environment might just leave you with a sense of wanting to do more yourself, there or when you are back home. As silly as it sounds: ask the bartender or waitress for a paper straw when you order a drink. If they don’t have the paper straws than ask them to skip the plastic straw for your drink. The more we spread the word to reduce, recycle and conserve the better our environment is all around the world. It is a simple mindset that needs to change to stop harming our wildlife and ourselves with all the microplastics in our environment. It was even noted by scientists that microplastics was found among the sands on the newly made island in Hawaii soon after the volcano erupted a few years ago.

We all have seen the gruesome photos of birds, mammals and likely been on a beach that was filthy before. So those people say things like, my little change isn’t going to help when others are still doing it... That might be accurate for now. However, the sentiment is changing and those who are conserving are the ones who made the world change for the better. And for those who love the water we appreciate the changes it will make in their life and our life. It is spectacular that this organization is contributing towards the discovery, protection and restoration of coral reefs, mangroves and seagrasses. Because of this pleasant experience I’m going to start asking the hotels prior to the reservations about their single use plastics and find out what they might be doing to offset some of the issues that resorts cause. I am also up for hands on learn and scuba trip. Any ideas on ways you can help the oceans? If so, email me with suggestions.





## Environmental and Legislating Updates

Judy K



### Positive Legal updates:

Don't release those balloons! As we all know the awful outcomes due to mylar and latex balloons towards littering the beaches, entangling our birds and often getting eaten causing the animal's death. Thankfully, Suffolk County, East Hampton and Long Beach now all have bans in place that limit the intentional release of balloons. It's expected that more towns, county's and hopefully states will follow suit in the coming years. Sort of in the same realm of banning the plastic bag, which was at one time laughable to some as they didn't think it would happen in our area, but it is slowly happening.

### Shark Finning Ban (not quite law – yet):

The Shark Fin Sales Elimination Act of 2019; makes it illegal to possess, buy, or sell shark fins or any product containing shark fins, except for certain dogfish fins. A person may possess a shark fin that was lawfully taken consistent with a license or permit under certain circumstances. This proposal has passed the House of Representatives; but has yet to be voted on in the Senate. The Senate bill is currently awaiting the approval from the Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee before it can even be voted on. It needs support, so please contact your senators and ask for them to co-sponsor it.





**Artifishal -  
Film at the New Rochelle  
Public Library December 3, 2019**



Amanda Slattery



Widely advertised as “Join us for a screening of Artifishal, a Patagonia film about people, rivers and the fight for the future of wild fish and the environment that supports them” a number of us thought we were going to see a film about fish in Chile and Argentina.

How surprised we were when the subject turned out to be salmon farming in the American Northwest. Nevertheless, it was an eye-opening experience of the cruelty employed in catching wild fish, extracting their eggs, confining developing fish in overcrowded holding pens and the resultant development of disease. We also learned how the construction of dams along rivers through which the salmon swim for spawning has interfered with the life-cycle of the wild creatures. Finally the mating of farmed fish with wild is degenerating the quality of the wild salmon. It is a film which makes one want to not support the industry and spurn the product - it's a pity I like smoked salmon so much!

***For more information :***

<https://www.seafoodwatch.org/>

<https://www.seafoodwatch.org/seafood-recommendations/consumer-guides>

<https://www.seafoodwatch.org/ocean-issues/aquaculture>

<https://fisheryprogress.org/>

***To download a Seafood Watch Guide:***

<https://www.seafoodwatch.org/-/m/sfw/pdf/guides/mba-seafoodwatch-northeast-guide.pdf?la=en>



## Explorers Club - Sea Stories 2019

Gary Lehman



Those who have been active with The Scuba Sports Club for a few years know that the annual Sea Stories convocation held in November at the venerable Explorers Club in Manhattan is one of the highlights of the dive year. It is a full-day affair attended by many members of our Club, as well as members of other dive clubs in the greater NY/NJ metro area. ‘Old Home Evening’ is a good descriptor, with acquaintances becoming friends, igniting future collaborations - and meeting up with people/fellow divers who may not have seen each other in months—or for that matter since the prior year’s Sea Stories!

Fabulous photos accompany this article on the next page, taken by Steve Dicosola, whom many of you may know. Steve’s photography at <https://www.instagram.com/slickshot53> and <https://SlickShotImageArt.smugmug.com> Facebook <http://tinyurl.com/y94jdja5> ). *Thank you Steve for sharing your terrific photography with us!*

This year, TSSC members in attendance included: Tom Butcher, Alan Rios, Kevin Cushing, Liza Handziak, Judy Dronzek, Vreni Roduner, James Kafka, Michelle Memoli and Amanda Slattery.

The Explorer’s Club’s Sea Stories is day focused on exploration, conservation, scuba diving, shipwrecks and marine biology. Biologists, explorers, archeologists, environmental advocates, and those looking for shipwrecks and exotic far-away places and cultures are encouraged to attend! So many transformational ocean life endeavors are explored at Sea Stories. Sea Stories is generally held on the second Saturday of November, so pencil in November 14 for Sea Stories 2020!

Here was this year’s lineup of presentations:

**David Mearns** presented on the ‘Golden age of Shipwreck Hunting’. Mearns has discovered some historic and important ships, including *HMS Hood* (sunk by German battleship *Bismarck* in 1941). He’s got several books out, including *The Shipwreck Hunter* – on my list!

**Robbie Schmittner** presented on "Sac Actun: Exploring the World's Largest Cave." Schmittner has spent most of his adult life mapping Mexico’s interconnected and standalone cenotes. He has discovered over 450 kilometers of uncharted caves. Our Club has dived the cenotes of the Yucatan, and as such is indebted to Schmittner for his explorations and discoveries!



## Explorers Club - Sea Stories 2019

Gary Lehman



**Choy Aming** presented on “*Secrets of the Tiger Shark Highway.*” Ever wonder about the sanity of videoing up-close-and-personal 14’ tiger sharks feasting on a whale carcass – while sitting atop the whale carcass? (What happens if you slip off in your black wet suit, fully coated in whale oil and having a beating heart and warm blood? Probably best to not ask that question...) Mr. Aming founded the Bermuda Shark Project and is a world expert on the sharks of Bermuda, and tiger sharks in particular. His work revealed annual migration patterns of the species. If tiger sharks are still around in twenty years (and let us hope that they are), it will be in no small measure due to the work of Mr. Aming!

**Randall Arauz** was on the agenda with “*From Science to Policy: Changing the Tide for Endangered Marine Species in the Eastern Tropical Pacific.*” Randall has a life-long interest in marine environmental advocacy. Quoting from the Explorers Club bio for Sea Stories: “His current work ranges from community based sea turtle conservation and promotion of small scale sustainable fisheries, to directing studies on the migratory movements of turtles and sharks in the Eastern Tropical Pacific, with the goal of expanding no-take areas and creating transboundary marine protected areas or ‘swimways.’”

The last presentation was by **Beth Neale** entitled: “*Breathless Exploration - Discovering Your Inner Freediver.*” Freediving holds mere scuba divers spellbound with the challenges and rewards it offers, and Neale is at the top of the pyramid surpassing other vaunted freedivers. Encumbered with all gear, including air tanks, cutting tools, surface marker buoys, cameras, pony bottles, fins, gear and fins and so on, it is hard for scuba divers to visualize Neale freediving – without fins – to 50 meters... Hard to imagine swimming through a school of jacks with no blowing bubbles, that is for sure! Freediving connects the diver to the environment in a very direct way with no “technology” and noisy bubbles and contraptions in between; the experience of freediving intensified Neale’s dedication and influence as a marine environment advocate. To her eternal credit she is educating the next generation – the children - to the wonders of our undersea world and is leveraging her corporate background in wildlife film production and digital media. Way to go, Beth!



# TSSC's 2019 Holiday Party Post Card !



# TSSC's 2019 Holiday Party Post





# TSSC's 2019 Photo Contest Winners !



## Professional Above

- #1 Let's Get ready To Rumble! : Melissa Lonquich
- #2 The Flight of Summer: Melissa Lonquich
- #3 The Impressions We Leave Behind: Melissa Lonquich

## Professional Below

- #1 Skyline of the Sea: Melissa Lonquich
- #2 Please – No Pictures: William J. Torres
- #3 Exploring Our Past: Melissa Lonquich

## Non-Professional Above

- #1 \_dsc4142-DxO-1 (Croc) - Gary Lehman
- #2 Hippo Up Close - Gary Lehman
- #3 DSC\_4106 (Dolphin) - Gary Lehman

## Non-Professional Below

- #1 Feeling Crabby: Henry Hall
- #2 Seahorse and two flamingo Tongues: Robert Yarusso
- #3 Lizard Fish with Cleaning Goby in Mouth: Robert Yarusso





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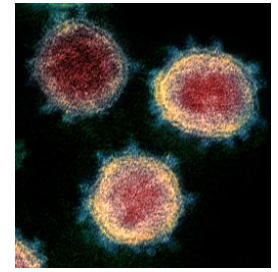
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## MY TURN.....China, COVID-19 ---- and the Need for Global Collaboration To Save Planet Earth



By NIAID - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/niaid/49534865371/>, CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?>

We can't blame China for everything... Well, maybe the new corona virus did start there - spreading globally in the same fashion as the flu, by close contact with infected people and from respiratory droplets of the infected person who sneezes or coughs. The flu season is typically fall and winter, meanwhile, more colds are reported in the winter and spring (according to the CDC). I hear people say and think how the warmer weather will help get rid of this COVID-19. But I looked at the official numbers of cases and find that Australia, Indonesia, Egypt, Philippines, Brazil and Key West all have COVID-19. The fact is that it is spreading -- even to those warmer climates. Now the thought process is the warmer weather doesn't hold the moisture droplets for the same amount of time that the cold air does. The health experts also say in the wintertime people are in closer contact inside as compared to being outside. All I know is keep clear of sick people and stay home if/when sick; the same applies to diving. If you are not up to dive for whatever reason, don't go. If you do go you may be placing others in harm's way -- and that's not being a good buddy!

We are all placing more stress on the earth during the wintertime. We cut down more than 7,000 square meters of trees per second, according to University of Maryland, Global Forest Watch. Just think -- that's about the length of a soccer pitch (90-130 yards). We buy and use more oil that needs to be drilled out of the land and oceans, then transported to our homes/businesses. We use wood to heat our houses, build buildings, make shipping boxes, brown bags and so much more. Maybe the new law in NY to bring your own bag will help reduce the plastic bags and the brown bags. Heck -- we should all strongly request that our Amazon purchases come when the order is complete -- this will mean fewer boxes shipped, which will be destined for the trash (or best case, recycle bin...). Hopefully, it will become second nature to all American's to *bring their own bags to stores when shopping*. Just be mindful of the fact that we are losing one of the biggest filters for carbon-dioxide pollution which cleans the air and water, each and every time we cut trees down.

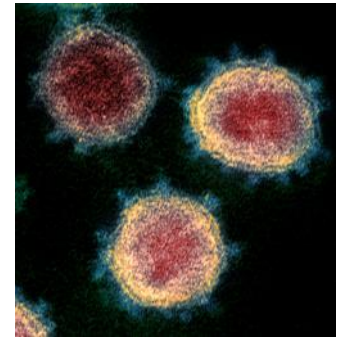


Our warmer winters cause more ice melting in the Arctic sea. It's an awful situation because the ice helps to cool the earth by reflecting solar energy back out and into space. Once we lose that reflectivity of the ocean around the ice, it becomes darker, absorbing energy which warms and melts more ice. The picture shows the difference in colors, as well as the lack of ice. The ice used to be in the entire distance of open water in the photo. The salt water has a lower freezing point, causing the ice to absorb less heat in order to melt in salt water than in fresh water. As divers we also know that salt water and fresh water have different densities, with the salt water being denser. Therefore, more weight is needed in salt water than fresh. At the end of the summer in 2019, at the time when the Arctic sea ice extent reaches its annual minimum, the area covered by Arctic sea ice shrank to its second lowest level since satellite monitoring began in 1979 according to NASA's Earth Observatory. Although I do not particularly *like* winter, I do feel bad for all those sea animals and mammals which need the ice to survive. Polar bears are the animals we think of when we talk ice melting -- but what about the narwhal and Greenland shark? These creatures (among so many others) are affected by climbing temperature changes, too!

Animals and viruses do not respect any political borders -- they affect the entire globe. Therefore, when a country cuts down trees for firewood, uses fossil fuels, conducts fracking for gas, or manufactures plastics, this all stresses the Earth and all its creatures. To alleviate some of this stress businesses and people are using renewable energy: solar power, wind farms, hydro, biomass and geothermal. When looking at the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and Renewable Energy Policy Network's plan it shows significant power to be generated from these sources in the European Union.



## MY TURN.....China, COVID-19 ---- and the Need for Similar Global Collaboration to save Planet Earth

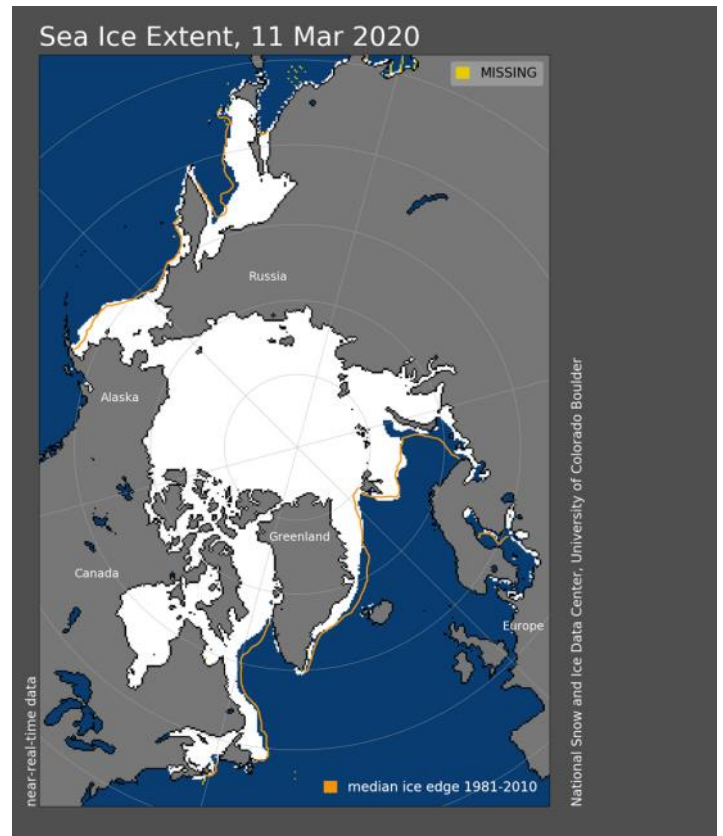
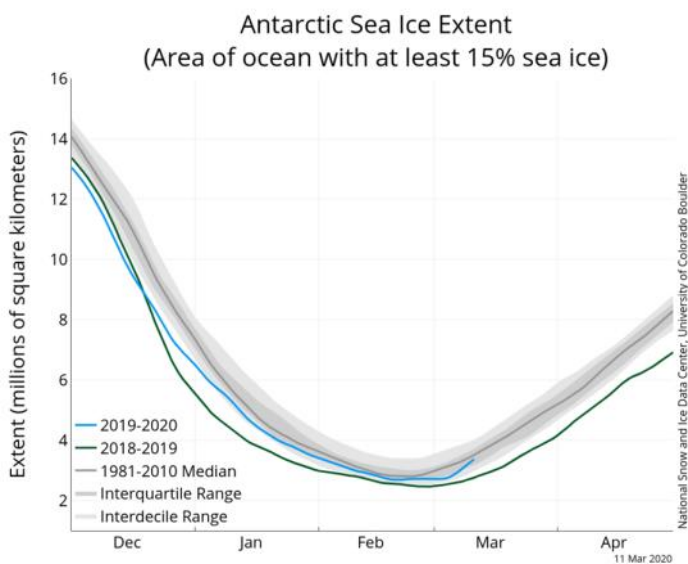


By NIAID - <https://www.flickr.com/photos/niaid/49534865371/>, CC BY 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=87484997>

China invested \$83.4 billion and America spent \$55.5 billion in 2019 on renewable energy. It's big business to realize these changes are happening, and to continue to invest for the benefit of future generations -- with as little negative and current impact as possible. So even the little things like reusing your own bag or larger purchases of hybrid cars or solar panels providing power for our homes will release some of the stress we place on this <our only> Earth. I know it will take a while for people's thoughts and actions to change, but trying small things -- like demanding no plastic straws and thanking the business owners who support these environmental initiatives - does make a difference when we all collaborate in common cause.

World political leadership with worldwide medical resources are increasingly collaborating to fight this increasing threat of COVID-19. Some countries appear to be getting it under some control. The leadership of these countries are sharing their best practices in this fight. So a potential bright spot here with COVID-19 is that it might help us all in the fight to save our environment -- let us hope that in similar fashion, the world's leaders and people find a way to collaborate to stop the deterioration of Planet Earth's environments and--- find solutions! Better for us all.

Graphics courtesy of the National Snow and Ice Data Center, University of Colorado, Boulder





## Amos Nachoum at The NYC Explorers Club — Film Debut, *A Picture of His Life*

Gary Lehman



On January 8, 2020 the Explorers Club in NYC hosted wildlife photographer Amos Nachoum and his friends for the NY premier of the film *Picture of His Life*. The film was followed by a conversation/Q&A with Amos and Nancy Spielberg, who assisted producing the film. The other producers of this superb film, Dani Menkin and Yonatan Nir were unfortunately unable to attend the Explorers' Club screening due to other commitments. The Explorers' Club was packed that night with Amos's friends, scuba divers from all over the NY/NJ area who admire Amos's work, members of NY Underwater Photography Society, NYC Sea Gypsies scuba dive club, and staff from the B&H photography retail megacenters. As a former NY'r for many years (once a NY'r, always a NY'r!), Amos has many friends from all over the NYC metropolitan region, and many of them together at the Explorers Club to celebrate their friend's triumphant success!

### **So What Has This Guy Amos Been Up To? And Why is He Here, at the Explorers Club?**

Many NYC-area photographers, scuba divers, and environmental activists know about Amos and have attended his presentations to various clubs and groups in the area. Audiences are spellbound by his ground-breaking photographs of 'big animals' (which is the name of the wildlife-encounter expedition firm he founded). An example: white sharks-- Amos films outside a shark cage, capturing unobstructed video and stills and establishing a connection with these animals. Diving outside a cage with white sharks is rather hair-raising to casual observers, but by no means unique. It is not a death sentence! Key is understanding white shark behavior. Filming white sharks outside a protective cage and returning safely with spectacular video and still images supports our understanding that this species is clearly not the bloodthirsty monster hellbent on tearing humans apart as portrayed in Spielberg's film *Jaws*. (In fact, Spielberg has for many years greatly regretted his film's role to viscerally support this myth). However, Amos doesn't stop by just swimming outside the cage with white sharks, in fact he extends all previous wildlife encounter parameters – for example, he has been inside a bait ball -- and even got a photo of a sailfish at the instant of grabbing a sardine -- no one else in the history of our species ever captured a photograph like that!

Amos has led expeditions in the Antarctic photographing a leopard seal making predations on penguins. This photography expedition entailed several considerable risks - not the least of which was that diving in frigid Antarctic waters risks the possibility of a frozen regulator - cutting off the diver's air tank. This is particularly dangerous given that there might be a limited number of breathing holes in the icepack. Furthermore, leopard seals can grow huge (infinitely agile and maneuverable, up to 12' long, and 1,000 pounds of steel muscle), armed with incisor and canine teeth which resemble those of a bear or lion-- with which they might dispatch a mere human with ease. They are not inclined to do so (although there has been at least one instance in which a British marine biologist in the Antarctic was killed by a leopard seal, perhaps as territorial defense). Consider that leopard seals encountered by Amos had almost certainly never seen a human being before – and certainly not one underwater - which raises the potential for mistaken identity resulting in aggressive territorial defense. Recall that underwater photography involves using cameras in housing with big, reflective transparent domes. So, what do you think happens when a leopard seal sees its own reflection in a



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camera dome? The seal is likely to feel threatened and believe that its territory was being challenged by the strange warm-blooded, lung-breathing and heart-beating mammalian with the black wetsuit and strange silver air tank, AND/OR challenged by the animal it sees (its own reflection) in the camera dome! Amos figured all this out quickly by being 'inside the head' of the leopard seal, and shrewdly used his intuition, judgement and situational awareness to neither advance nor retreat -- thus avoiding triggering an attack by the leopard seal.

### **OK, So... White Sharks and Leopard Seals, Totally Amazing --- but What Else?**

At another time and place, Amos resolved to get a photo of an eagle impaling a fish with its talons and flying away with it. OK, so that has been done before many times... but the catch was this -- he wanted to get the shot looking UP, from underwater! So, he planned for it, and true to form he got that unique shot. He has also photographed 25' anaconda snakes in the Amazon – underwater. Consider that anacondas can suffocate and consume 150lb capybaras and even jaguars; what chance would a mere human have, especially underwater? And he filmed crocodiles in the Okavango delta in Botswana – again, underwater. Imagine having your camera dome – inches from your head-- bumped by the terrifying teeth of an 'old salty' crocodile underwater (remember that humans ARE on the crocodilian menu as our species has experienced down through the millennia in Africa, Australia and the Andaman Islands, should the opportunity present to the crocodile). Amos asserts that his learned understanding of animal behavior defines the rules by which he photographs these animals; the current animal behavioral understanding is that crocodiles (and the 25' anaconda he swam with) will make predations by approaching upwards towards the prey, ambushing and closing in unseen from below and behind. So - - if one stays on the bottom with them -- you are safe. You can even pet them, which Amos did (yes, he petted a wild anaconda on the bottom). Of course, this begs the question-- what if the current understanding is wrong? What if the crocodile or anaconda on the stream bottom gets startled and reacts defensively by attacking, or in the decisive moment gets the idea to adapt, and switches up their normal predatory behavior and attempts a predation resulting from mistaking Amos for a wayward and vulnerable capybara? (...Someday someone will have to ask Amos that question!) ...Actually, Amos has had to deal with that awkward (ummm... terrifying) situation – which happened when a hungry polar bear continued to attack him - even below the 'conventional wisdom' 30' "maximum" depth, and the bear followed him down to 70' -- in an effort to catch him!). Some people no doubt believe that 1) Amos is 'meshugana' (crazy, nuts) and 2) that he earns both the 'Born under a Lucky Star' award AND the Darwin award for surviving despite profoundly reckless behavior. Amos of course begs to differ with that perception!

Amos's topside wildlife photography is also astounding; he is among a very few humans on Earth who have, through stealth, patience, expert tracking, photographic know-how, and prodigious physical endurance against piercing cold (while staying immobile in stealth mode) managed to photograph polar bears in the Arctic making predations on seals, smelling them and then punching through the snow to break into their dens -- and most incredibly, photographing snow leopards above 5,000 meters in the frozen Ladakh mountain wilderness. In this endeavor Nachoum succeeded where adventurer/author Peter Matthiessen and world-renowned primate biologist George Schaller (of mountain gorilla fame) had failed.



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### So, What About this Film *Picture Of His Life*?

Granted -- the above listed, first-ever photography achievements by Nachoum are astounding, each and all. But for Amos, there remained one elusive subject -- which would prove the capstone of his career: videoing and photographing polar bears -- filmed underwater! In the film *Picture of His Life* we follow his journey: suffering setbacks, challenges, roadblocks, terrifying polar bear attacks, and finally, triumph! The film is at first glance a thrilling adventure story, and a timeline/biography about Nachoum. However, on further reflection and a deeper, more impactful level, it portrays the fulfillment of one person's mission and dream -- in pursuit of the crowning achievement of a remarkable life and wildlife photography career. The empowering message -- set your goals high, and with determination and purpose, you will achieve your goals!

The film reminds us of a fine kilim or rug, weaving together the threads of Nachoum's life - masterfully produced by Menkin and Nir. Flashbacks from his earlier life are interspersed in the film with his explorations and his time in the tundra with the mosquitoes, and on the ice filming the polar bears. Many esteemed, revered icons of marine biology and conservation offer congratulations and supportive declarations about Nachoum in the film, including Dr. Sylvia Earle (Her Deepness!) and Jean Michel Cousteau, among others. Amos's efforts to raise awareness about habitat destruction are called out and highlighted repeatedly.

Many people who have seen his presentations, his wildlife videos and photographs have wondered -- what makes this guy "tick"? Why does he do this? Why does he sojourn to the most inhospitable places on our Earth -- and risk being underwater with big animals which could easily (if they wanted) abbreviate his existence - to photograph and film these animals -- and subject himself and his photo team to extreme weather and other dangers? (Two of his Inuit fixers in Nunavut sadly drowned when their snowmobile broke through thin ice. The film we are discussing is dedicated to their memory. Without their assistance and knowledge of the ways of the polar bear, Nachoum would never have been successful in his life-long quest of filming polar bears underwater....). One of the leitmotifs, recurring themes of the film are the words from an Inuit children's song, words which are along the lines of 'the bear goes over the mountain, to see what he can see...'. Certainly, Amos has an impulse to exploration; this is a fundamental aspect and driver in human nature. Our species has always wanted to see for ourselves exactly just what is around the river bend. Some may have speculated about aspects of his life's journey, and some wish to understand the context of his dual missions of wildlife photography and environmental activism. Amos is a complex individual; one might ask the difficult, personal and sensitive questions: where is he going towards with his endeavors and why and even -- the most sensitive question -- is there also something perhaps from which he is retreating?

Viewing this marvelous film will answer those questions, and much more.

The film is surely an adventure film, but beyond that -- it is an intimate portrait. Nachoum has allowed us access to his innermost and personal spaces. In the film we hear from the people who have known him the longest, and some who may have thought he was a pain in the backside, and worried about him as both the over-achiever and at the same time the 'sorgenkind' (the child about whom parents worry the most, with concern about their future happiness and success in life), and we hear also from those who have loved him since the beginning, including his sisters and father and his brother-comrades from his Israeli Army service. We are at his father's 90th birthday party, and here we meet the family. We hear



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from his cantankerous, badgering and intensely loving father (who suffered PTSD from combat in Israel's War of Independence...) And we learn of Nachoum's own emotional withdrawal and PTSD after being in battle in the horrendous killing fields of the 1973 Yom Kippur War. When young soldiers see things that no person should ever have to see and endure, some of the most thoughtful and sensitive individuals need to take a standing eight count for a while - or even a lifetime - to recover...

Many in the aftermath of combat take a pause to redefine their lives and life goals, sometimes (oftentimes) not in keeping with their parents' hopes and dreams for them— this is most difficult for aging parents, some of whom have lived through the Depression, WWII -- and worse. Thus it was with Nachoum. This disconnect between the son and his father is at times painful for all involved, and even more so with the shroud of their living memory of the Holocaust. (For example, many in Nachoum's circumstances -including me and just perhaps, you too...- were obliged during our childhoods to ask "WHY, please explain, WHY do we have no uncles, aunts, cousins or other family relatives at our holiday meals?") In the film, his father plaintively asks Amos, "WHY are you not carpenter, you are so skilled at carpentry??" Amos grimaces, looks challenged by the question and sad... how can he possibly explain to his aging father his different calling, in a way to make his father understand and accept? They are so closely together -- and yet also so many worlds apart. In the film, his father is calling for his son Amos at the very end. So, fair warning friends, this is a far-reaching film - before you settle in to watch this film, buckle up! Be prepared to laugh with Amos - share his frustrations, bitter disappointments, exultant triumphs -- be inspired by his teaching (yes, fundamentally Nachoum is a teacher, albeit it not your typical classroom teacher type...) – feel the fire of energized environmental activism – and share his outrage at the atrocities committed by humans against our environment out of ignorance and greed. . While watching the film, allow Amos to lead you on your own visitation with your long-departed and most beloved (albeit complex) parent -- and perhaps even cry a little with Amos (I did...). Also know in advance that Nachoum never takes any credit for himself. His first and every impulse is to thank all those fixers who helped him onsite in those most remote locations on our Earth, and he gives all the credit to those whom he met along the path to make this film - and to make the life therein portrayed.

Amos is still a soldier – he is a warrior for the environment and his cartridges are his compact flash cards and SD cards locked and loaded in the magazines inside his Nikon D5 and D500 cameras, and his artillery are his wideangle, zoom and 600mm lenses.

### **And the Q&A and The Explorers Club? How was that?**

The Explorers Club was packed. The main presentation room was standing room only. Everyone attending knew that this was going to be a very special evening, and vigorous applause erupted when Nachoum approached the podium for his opening remarks before the film started. Amos was all beaming smiles -- but also – just for a moment -- plainly emotional. I think I know exactly what he was thinking and feeling... (Perhaps it is best to spell it out: Here he was, presenting at the venerable Explorers Club in Manhattan, NYC, USA. With the spirits of his departed family and communities of his life gathering together in the room unseen arriving from on high, there with us assembled in the room, watching Amos -- and beaming with pride.)

One of the great aspects of attending presentations at the Explorers Club is just meeting fellow attendees! We enjoy reuniting with our scuba diving friends. We may not have seen them for months. Gives us all a chance to get all caught up on life's



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headlines! We met up with friends from NYC Sea Gypsies, NY Underwater Photography Society friends, and other friends from diving. And it was really great meeting and speaking with young college student Michael, now a rising sophomore at his far-north university; Michael is studying marine biology in Arctic environments! What a strategic and profoundly important place to be studying! Arctic environments are under such intense and terrible stress now, not only from global climate change but due to rapidly expanding commercial and military exploitation. This trend will only worsen as the icepacks continue to disintegrate and the innermost regions become increasingly accessible. We all need young leader Michael and his friends and colleagues in there, fighting on behalf of that threatened environment. Michael's tall and strong stature and his bright, intense eyes, his clearly burgeoning scientific knowledge and engaging, confident manner project exceptional promise for his future career! What a fantastic opportunity for him here at the Explorers Club for this leadership young person, studying marine biology in one of the great subsurface unexplored regions! How many new species, what transformational research and findings will he bring forward in future years, which will put into action positive policy changes, and hopefully a halt to environmental destruction and recovery in this most fragile region! We can be sure that young Michael will extend and expand upon and stand on the shoulders of Nachoum in advocating for the polar bears and other wildlife in his backyard. It is terrific that Michael had the chance to imbue the spirit of exploration at The Explorers Club, surrounded by many treasures such as Thor Heyerdahl's globe and all those Explorers Club expedition flags, and all the rest of the artifacts so generously distributed throughout the Club. And for Michael to see this film, in this venue, in common cause with these other attendees, and to speak with Nachoum as a mentor, how great is that! To Michael we wish, and are totally confident about and fully expecting, exceptional success in all current and future studies and career!

The Q&A served as a fitting coda to the evening, reaffirming and summarizing the themes of the film and the subject individual. One question was "Did you ever look into the eyes of some big animal while you were photographing it -- and did you at that point see something or even someone inside, communicating to you?". Nachoum thought for a moment, then responded with an excellent, considered and quite practical answer. He indicated that indeed, yes, he did have a sense of connection on many occasions with 'big animals', and recalled in particular that the polar bear cubs swimming with their mother were fascinated by him, and wanted to swim over to him to investigate and play. There was, however, zero connection from mama bear to Nachoum, other than an initially puzzled and then somewhat annoyed and watchful awareness. Nachoum explained that she had no time for nonsense or 'extended sensitivity awareness-building' with the meshugana (crazy) human. Like ALL busy mothers, she had to keep her cubs close, safe, near her, not wandering off here and there, and most of all, she needed to keep an intensely watchful eye out for adult males with an appetite for any polar bear cubs which they did not sire and are not their bloodline -- or just as an afternoon snack. Amos knows that mother polar bears will fight to their death against marauding males with bad intent on her cubs, but, other than aggressive defense they don't really stand a chance against the much larger adult males. So it was -- with all the questions asked: the returning theme of Nachoum's answers was the empowering message that people can decide what they want to be and do - and then make a plan to get there; determination will carry the day and get them wherever they want to be. Amos spoke with great passion about the urgent need to stop and reverse environmental degradation and habitat loss/destruction -- or else those big animals which he loves and which he wishes to bequeath to future generations will be gone by the time we understand the animals or the environmental crisis we are in. He teared up recalling the mother orca he observed over



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several days desperately trying to revive her dead calf, which had died due to concentrations of toxins in her milk. The film and the evening were, therefore, a stern call to action.

Nachoum’s father wanted him to be a carpenter. That was not in the cards. To Amos’ father I would offer --not to worry -- his son is indeed a carpenter, in fact, more than that he is a civil engineer and a brain surgeon – on the one hand building bridges between peoples, building awareness of the terrible threat of habitat destruction on our Earth, and Nachoum is also a brain surgeon operating “inside the heads” of so many who have been inspired by his empowering message of pursuing one’s dreams, and loving our Mother Earth and protecting our ‘mayim’ – our water, the water so precious and familiar to Nachoum after a lifetime of diving – our water, the source of all life on Earth, which is so gravely threatened.

Friends, we have a masterpiece film here with *Picture of His Life* -- every great credit (‘bravo zulu’ and ‘yasher koach’ for this, and for all future endeavors) to Nachoum but also producers Dani Menkin, Yonatan Nir, and Nancy Spielberg for bringing this together for us so brilliantly.







## **Saving Djibouti's Whale Sharks – Dr. Jennifer Schmidt of Shark Research Institute Leads The Way !**

Gary Lehman

In December 2019 **TSSC** had the opportunity to participate in SRI's whale shark data-gathering mission in the Gulf of Tadjoura, Djibouti (located in the Horn of Africa, near the Gulf of Aden). The mission extended over two weeks; the 'week one' team focused on tagging whale sharks in the region, and the 'week two' team (in which **TSSC** participated) was missioned to patrol areas where whale sharks were observed to have traversed in the past in the Gulf of Tadjoura. The mission was to find and photograph the whale sharks, concentrating on filming or videoing the sharks' distinctive spot patterns, and examine the status/condition of tags previously placed on the whale sharks. Research confirms that each whale shark has its own unique spot pattern, which can be used to confirm the identification of individual sharks. The overall SRI objective is to gather data about the life and times of whale sharks in this region in order to help the species survive in Djibouti - and elsewhere - in the future. In order to assess the threats to the species, researchers still need a lot of basic baseline data about them: where they go, what they do, and when/how/why. For example (as we were soon to observe) this baseline knowledge would be helpful to ban certain activities such as dragnet fishing in a coastal area, particularly if it is known that whale sharks frequent the target area during a particular time of year.

Indeed, there are grave threats to their long-term survival - both in the Gulf of Tadjoura and other whale shark aggregation areas. The role of the participants in the mission was to be 'research assistants' to Dr. Schmidt, who provided data gathering direction to the research team each day of these two missions. That said, the week aboard the ship *also had lots of opportunities* for recreational diving and 'off the Richter scale' fantastic snorkeling – all under the watchful eye of our PADI Instructor (& our mission divemaster) Vincent!

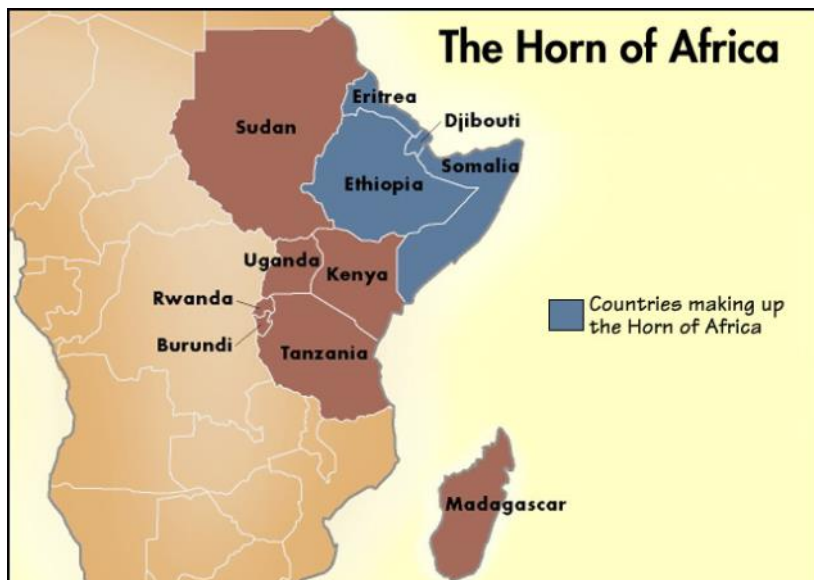
### **SRI's Mission to Protect Whale Sharks from Multiple Threats... and a Grim Discovery**

The urgency of SRI's whale shark mission was gravely brought home to the team on one of the early 'whale sharking' forays of the second mission. While on skiff patrol to find and photograph the sharks, ever-alert college biology major Jess (one of the research assistants working on various projects with Dr Schmidt) spotted a whale shark, and she immediately called out its position with precision. The two skiffs peeled off and headed over to the area indicated with great expedition in order to put camera-wielding researchers into the water to photo ID the shark! The shark which Jess spotted however proved elusive; it may have either dived deep or otherwise changed course to beat a hasty egress from the area -- perhaps it got skittish about the converging skiffs and revving engine noise. Or, maybe it just detected a lot of plankton in another direction! Whatever the case, it was not located again - but while looking for Jess's shark, two other researchers, Sophie and Kate - made a discovery... They spotted another whale shark about 12 meters down on the bottom, not moving. That did not portend good things.... Upon further inspection the team - lead by intrepid and supreme free-diver research assistant Ralph and our



## Saving Djibouti's Whale Sharks – Dr. Jennifer Schmidt of Shark Research Institute Leads The Way !

Where in the WORLD is Djibouti ????





## **Saving Djibouti's Whale Sharks – Dr. Jennifer Schmidt of Shark Research Institute Leads The Way !**

Gary Lehman

PADI Instructor (and naturalist/divemaster) Vincent - discovered that the shark had become entangled in heavy fishing net and drowned. (Like most sharks, whale sharks need to keep moving in the water to provide a constant flow of water through their gills to oxygenate the shark's blood supply.) Seeing this dead whale shark decaying on the bottom was a shocking and disheartening discovery for the team...

PADI Instructor (and divemaster) Vincent Amelineau and research assistant Ralph descended to the dead shark to comprehensively video and document the grim scene. The videos are sad to watch. Swarms of little fish were slowly reducing the decaying shark, which in death is providing sustenance to marine life. In the immediate aftermath of this discovery, local authorities became aware of the incident and the video was circulated in the government. Jennifer advises that the video was viewed with alarm all the way up to the office of the Prime Minister of Djibouti. In response, the government reportedly will be enacting a ban on net fishing during whale shark season. While the Djibouti government recognizes the importance of ecotourism centered on the whale sharks traversing the Gulf of Tadjoura feeding on plankton, it is uncertain what action can be taken to restrict or change the fishing methods of local fishermen whose fishing nets kill whale sharks and other species as bycatch. Let's hope that corrective measures can and will be taken soon to protect *both* the local fishermen and their dependent families *\*and\** the whale sharks which are so important to the economy of the region.

### **Wildlife is Threatened Across Africa – and the World....**

Terrestrial and marine species face similar threats and challenges all over the world. Protecting against habitat loss/destruction on behalf of endangered wildlife frequently negatively impacts the people in the region (who are frequently desperately poor). Simply put – the animals need territory to roam, feed, as nursery areas and for age-old migrations --- but the farmers need some of that very same land to farm to feed their families. Who comes first – the farmers or the wildlife? Depends on who you ask, perhaps. Can this be a positive sum game where both the farmers, economy, tourists, and wildlife all win? Perhaps. That is the holy grail of course.

Djibouti is in the Horn of Africa, an under-developed and economically depressed region which in the past has been threatened by both criminality and extremist religious oppression and terrorism in adjacent Somalia. The region has strategic significance as it shares control over the narrow straits separating the Gulf of Aden from the Red Sea and thus, access to the western Saudi Arabian Peninsula as well as the Suez Canal. Many developed countries have been sharing access and control - both commercial and military – for many years in the region, including the US, China, Japan, France and Britain. America's largest military base in Africa is Camp Lemonnier, located just outside the Djibouti City airport. All things considered protecting whale sharks may lose some priority in the long run due to the combination of these regional pressures.



## **Saving Djibouti's Whale Sharks – Dr. Jennifer Schmidt of Shark Research Institute Leads The Way !**

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In Eastern and Central Africa, land for farmers' crops and commercial agriculture is necessary to feed local families and communities. Agricultural expansion is increasingly encroaching into wildlife management areas; this is akin to the dragnet fishing which drowned the unfortunate whale shark which was at the wrong place at the wrong time. Wildlife frequently needs corridors for migration and movement, without which they cannot long survive in increasingly hemmed in areas. As an example, the few remaining mountain gorilla families in the Uganda/Rwanda/Congo holdouts are threatened by local farmers harvesting trees for charcoal (used for cooking), and most recently by the discovery of oil in the Congo mountain jungles which overlap part of the gorillas' habitat. Ecotourism has been crucial thus far in helping save the mountain gorillas from extinction, but... with human-borne disease (against which the gorillas have no protection), and the prospect of imminent oil drilling/extraction, combined with political instability, corruption, and potential for extremist religious terrorism in the mix, the future for mountain gorillas even in these inaccessible remote highlands is highly uncertain. The intractable problem – the wide range of urgent current human needs versus protection for local endangered wildlife (viz the fishermen's nets versus migrating whale sharks) -- replays time and again worldwide in different but analogous instances.

Whale sharks face many dangers as bad or worse than being bycatch in local fishermen's nets. Their huge pectoral, dorsal and caudal (tail) fins result in whale sharks being high-value fishing targets in some areas of the world for shark finning, feeding the East Asian appetite for shark fin soup because it is expensive, and is eaten to show status and personal prosperity (and even sometimes for imagined sexual benefits). (Research shows that shark fins contain high concentrations of mercury and other toxins, because sharks are at the top of the marine food chain. Frequent consumers are likely headed for health disaster...) That said, there are what Dr. Sylvia Earle terms 'hope spots' in the fight against shark finning, and many groups including local governments and airlines are cooperating in the fight to reduce shark finning; cultural attitudes are shifting away from this atrocious practice, particularly among young people in East Asia. Sadly, whale sharks have been and are killed for their abundant liver oil (livers comprise up to 25% of their body weight; the oil provides buoyancy) – the liver oil is used for waterproofing wooden boats and other uses. The worst threats are systemic including whale shark bycatch casualties from industrial-scale nets targeting other species such as tuna, ship strikes, microplastics and toxins in the water, diminishing and degraded plankton, and global climate change which is disrupting age-old migration and life cycle patterns – all with unknown consequences for the shark's future. (Ship strikes might seem an unlikely threat to whale sharks, but in fact this is a major concern to many species, not just whale sharks. The return of humpback whales to the NY/NJ region feeding on improving stocks of bait fish menhaden has also meant an increasing number of strikes on these whales. The port of Newark is a busy commercial containership seaport, and local wildlife management authorities are working with local shipping companies such as Maersk, Evergreen, CMA, Hapag-Lloyd, Hanjin etc. to lessen the frequency of these whale strikes.)



## Saving Djibouti's Whale Sharks



### So, What Was it Like Being on this Whale Shark Mission?

SRI's mission in the Gulf of Tadjoura was at times challenging work for the research assistants (for example sliding off the skiffs and then dragging ourselves (or being dragged) back UP into the skiffs) when whale sharks were in the immediate vicinity of the skiff). But it was not all work; the daily schedule included a mix of 'whale sharking' and recreation. "Whale sharking" was the term used for snorkeling with the whale sharks with objective of photographing or videoing the front left side with the individual spot patterning. At other times during the day, we were free to enjoy amazing snorkeling and diving in this undiscovered region with impressive sea life. We also enjoyed an evening shore excursion to a beach - with impressively foreboding volcanic mountains looming in the dark beyond the light of our campfire! The reefs we snorkeled are pristine and teeming with fish; the diving is relaxed and rewarding.

Another unique experience was diving between the African and Arabian/Asian tectonic plates. There are literally cracks between adjacent lava walls which are pulling apart from each other; the cracks extend down into the depths. Plate tectonics involve vast and often continent-size land masses which are slowly drifting apart from (or colliding into) each other, each block (or plate) floating on top of deep-within-the-Earth oceans of molten rock. Intense seismic activity (in particular, the volcanos of the East African and Central African Rift Valleys) are usually evident along tectonic plate separation zones (where frequently earthquakes and land mass uplifting/submerging occur where tectonic plates collide). The only other place where it is possible to dive between tectonic plates is Thingvellir National Park (Silfra fissure) in Iceland, where the North American and Eurasian land masses are slowly pulling apart. The massive lava mountains and endless field of dark gray lava bear witness to the unimaginably cataclysmic geological forces originating deep in the bowls of the Earth, erupting and emerging in antiquity (35-50 million years ago) onto the Earth's surface in this Great African Rift Valley.

We also had the opportunity the day before we left Djibouti to tour Lac Assal – a great salt lake 75 miles from Djibouti City and 500ft below sea-level -- and the lowest geographic location on the African continent. (Thus, I became one of perhaps relatively few individuals to have been to both the *lowest* and the *highest* points (Mt. Kilimanjaro summit) on the African continent!

### Shout Out to Dr. Schmidt of SRI, and... WHO WERE These Research Assistants on the Mission?

The *logistics* for pulling together a mission like this are daunting, and Dr. Jennifer Schmidt worked alone on this. She did a truly amazing job of *organizing* all this, making all the arrangements, keeping all the moving parts for all the participants working in sync (such as pickups, transfers, side excursions, hotel reservations, care and feeding, equipment rentals, and reconfirming all participants travel documents, dive certifications, and travel plans) – and I am sure there was much, much more. (Make no mistake – operating in LDC's (less-developed countries lacking significant infrastructure elements such as Djibouti) can be a frustrating and frequently thankless job!) Jennifer generously, good-naturedly and enthusiastically shared her prodigious and far-reaching knowledge -- with her quiet but searing intensity. Everyone listening learned a ton – and everyone was listening. Even the crew listened in at times (other duties permitting...)! With Jennifer, it was not all just about the sharks – the reach and range of her knowledge and



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experience extended to local and regional politics and history, geography, the fascinating geology of the region, all aspects of wildlife management, worldwide whale shark status, birding, local culture and “ways and means”, and -- local diving of course! Dr. Schmidt also had her stash of medications and field medical knowledge to assist out those ‘mission specialists’ who ran into all and any manner of health speed bumps. Many of us were temporarily (for a day or two) afflicted with transient conditions of one kind or other, and Jennifer seemed to have a magic pharmacy in her dive bag to help each and every one of us out with meds and her medical knowledge. Even crew members at times benefited from her ministrations!

Best of all, we had several young people on the trip on board as research assistants. Some were graduate students, two were undergraduates – all studying aspects of marine biology, environmental protection and ecology, and wildlife management. It was heartwarming and inspiring watching the interaction between these fine young leadership scholars learning research methods/techniques and wildlife advocacy ways and means from Dr. Schmidt. They were just soaking it up, and Jennifer was their energetically engaged mentor. Her teaching will equip them for professional success in their chosen fields, and they will make a positive difference going forward. From microscope analysis of plankton samples to instruction on data collection of the behavior and life cycles of whale sharks, there was a lot of learning and sharing going on aboard the boat! Way to go team, and to Dr. Schmidt for her leadership with these students in their quest!

***It was interesting to review the team of mission participants on ‘week two’, and learn how we had all come to be together aboard M/Y Deli “whale sharking” with Dr. Schmidt.*** Let it be said that it was a great group of folks, and we all enjoyed each other’s company. And a very diverse group indeed we were! In no particular order, we had Jess, an undergrad with boundless energy, enthusiasm, and passion for environmental advocacy who is studying biology and is currently working with SRI’s Dr. Schmidt on several projects; her boyfriend AJ, who is a senior in college majoring in biology and who, like Jess, benefitted greatly from working with Dr. Schmidt learning the ways and means of field biology research; AJ’s older brother Adam who is pursuing a MS in Ecology and Environmental Management and whose research interest at the moment is the ocelots of Texas (Wow!); Ralph is our next participant: an incredible free diver, insurance industry executive, ‘human flag’ specialist (you had to be there...) --- Ralph has a friend who is familiar with Dr. Schmidt’s work from being onsite whale sharking in Isla Mujeres, Mexico; “T” – a government executive who conducted extensive research to find the best whale shark expedition with surpassing excellence in conservation; Sophie – a media executive who researched social media to find the best whale shark trips with deep commitment to environmental advocacy; Kate is a data processing executive and close friend of Sophie, and they have traveled together before and decided to travel together here in support of the whale sharks of Djibouti; Betsy is an airline executive who attended a consumer scuba diving expo in Chicago, was drawn to the work of SRI and thus connected to the Djibouti whale shark mission; Gill hails from New Zealand and brings both breathtaking artistry to her family, friends and community-at-large, as well as compelling understanding about global climate change dynamics from the ‘down under’ perspective; Ken Steinberg is an urgent care physician, mountaineer, avid diver, father, grandpa, and friend of mine – and your author Gary who writes long articles (time permitting) for **TSSC** when not working at his federal government job!



## Saving Djibouti's Whale Sharks



### What About the Whale Sharks? What Was It Like, Snorkeling With Them?

Many (if not most) readers of Scuba H2O know a bit about whale sharks. Some may have even snorkeled with them. Those who have been in the water with them, will surely be able to relate to the comments below! The basic facts about them are pretty well known to our community: they are fish (not whales); they eat plankton (they have no teeth capable of puncturing, ripping, crushing, tearing or sawing like other sharks); they are harmless to humans; they grow HUGE (up to 40' or possibly more – hence the name “whale” shark); they oxygenate their blood via their gills like most other fish; they live all over the world in warm water which has large quantities of plankton small fish, fish eggs, and krill; they have individually-distinctive polka dot spotting; they feed by swimming through or up into clouds of plankton; they can live up to 100 years; whale sharks have been around since the time of the dinosaurs and first variations of whale sharks were 50 million years ago, with current species Rhincodon first appearing approximately 20 million years ago; and -- they are endangered!

Whale sharks are neither a keystone nor an “indicator” species. The biome of the Gulf of Tadjoura would degrade but not collapse without whale sharks. Whale sharks are not a particularly important indicator species which project local conditions (other than to say that the presence of whale sharks certainly means there is a plankton/krill/small fish population – without which whale sharks would not be present). So, what is it exactly about whale sharks that creates such an emotional draw for us, why do we care about them? Dr. Schmidt observes that the sheer majesty of the species is at the heart of our concern for whale sharks. (The comments below richly reflect this sentiment!). She explains also that studying the biology of whale sharks and their habitat, and protecting the species is vital because what we learn in the process will provide concomitant benefits to successful wildlife management for many other species.

Basic facts about whale sharks really tell only part of the story! Our group started a discussion about how we all felt the first time we experienced the whale sharks! “Wow” was the overall, generalized reaction. Some of us had snorkeled with whale sharks in other locations before and were drawn to this location to see them again. Some of us were snorkeling with them for the first time, and so first impressions were fresh and ‘hot off the press’. The shared reaction was ‘thrilling’, “amazing”, and “awesome”. Some responses were more experiential : “I saw it coming directly at me through the murky plankton-rich water, and it saw me, and turned just slightly away and descended, swimming under me – and it was so big that I thought it looked like a submarine!”. Just about everyone commented on how large, and fast, and serene these animals are. And these are such SMALL whale sharks!

My own reactions after seeing a whale shark for the first time were similar. I slid into the water off the skiff ahead of “my” whale shark, anticipating the whale shark would swim by me in front quite closely. That is exactly what happened. I was in the water, looking around for it in the general direction I thought it would come from - and then - Suddenly, there it was! It was swimming towards my position, from my left to my right. We were pretty close to each other. I saw its right (continued next page)



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eye looking at me. It did not change course. Its mouth was open. I was so astounded by the encounter that the state of awe watching and being in the water with the whale shark overruled my usual autonomic response to video or photograph the situation; being so transfixed to not even raise my camera to film has *never happened* to me before. I was thunderstruck, just watching. Even in 2004 when I was in the same bunker in Normandy with US Army Rangers who were in their 80's, who had captured that very same Pointe Du Hoc bunker in which we were standing exactly sixty years prior, I nevertheless in that situation (despite shaky hands) took some photos (shaky photos though I might add....) But not today, not with this whale shark. I just watched in stunned awe. My secondary reaction was that here, in this place, the waters of the African Rift Valley of geologic antiquity, and here – not far from where skeletal remains of 3.5 million year old human primate *Australopithecus* were discovered – I was swimming with a life form relatively unchanged and dating back to some of the earliest periods of life on Earth. The antiquity of this whale shark life form was palpable. And then, with another serene sweep of its tail fin, it faded into the planktony murk. There was NO way that I could have caught up to it or kept up with it (unless I had an underwater sea scooter.) My heart was pounding! *So, I say to you readers --- SRI is ready to sign you up for the 2020 whale shark expedition, or any of the other expeditions they are offering, so be sure to visit them at Beneath The Sea in Secaucus, or... contact SRI via their website!*

### Tag Rescuing and Cleanup

There were some serious - and some comic - moments during our week as research assistants! By way of background, the team on week-one before us had the mission to attach tags on located whale sharks. Four tags were attached on four whale sharks. The tags are supposed to stay attached to the shark's dorsal fin for around six months collecting data - and then the tag is supposed to detach, float to the surface, and beacon its position for retrieval and data collection/analysis. The tags collect depth, water temperature and GPS coordinates when possible. This information forms a basic building block of data about the daily life and times of whale sharks. One of the four tags which had been placed the prior week was pinging and Dr Schmidt had its general location pinpointed; it must have either fallen off or perhaps had been scraped off by the whale shark. The tags will also ping when their GPS coordinates remain unchanged for a specific period (such as four days with constant GPS data), an indication that they were probably no longer attached or that some mishap had befallen the shark with the tag.

When the tags ping their location, the accuracy of the reported GPS location is within a 100-meter radius. Jennifer resolved to retrieve the pinging tag, because these tags are expensive! It is important for researchers to retrieve the tags whenever possible – not just for the data encoded on the tag, but also due to the expense of the tag. In this case, it was clear that there would be little to no useful data on the tag, given that it had only been in place for less than a week. Nevertheless, Dr. Schmidt and two volunteer researchers woke up before dawn to drive the skiff to the location indicated by the pinging tag and retrieve it.

On the electronic map, the tag's location appeared to be a little beach on a little island in the western part of the Gulf of Tadjoura. Looks can be deceiving, however. Upon arrival Jennifer and team discovered a small beach strewn with layer upon layer of garbage and plastics. The team (continued next page)





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attempted poking around through the garbage and broken glass to find the pinging tag, to no avail. After over an hour of searching, Jennifer decided that it was both pointless and dangerous to continue looking for the tag given the dangers of broken glass, uneven and sharp lava rocks, and vast amount of garbage. Adding insult to injury, the tag continued to ping and transmit its location. Perhaps SOME day it will be discovered. It should be noted that many of the shorelines we sailed past in search of whale sharks were strewn with trash. One must wonder if the Djibouti government might be able to initiate a program like the one in Nepal with Sherpas, who are paid a bounty for all trash collected and returned off Mt. Everest for proper disposal or recycling. There are many companies such as <https://www.oceansole.co.uk/> which make products like flip flop shoes and children's toys among other items from recovered and sanitized flipflops and plastics.

On a lighter note, one of the researchers aboard collects beer labels from all over the world. He was thrilled to successfully remove the label off a decidedly superior Ethiopian beer bottle to add the label to his collection. Unfortunately, it blew off the boat in a sudden gust of wind, and was on the surface floating away. Intrepid researcher Jess leaped into action! She donned her fins and mask and went into the water in a NY minute with determined expedition, swimming after the escaping beer label, retrieved same and returned it to <the thrilled> beer lover! Mission accomplished, and Jess earned the ***Pour Le Merite*** award of the trip for her intrepidity and conspicuous gallantry reflecting the highest standards of the Shark Research Institute! And there were other humorous instances, in which one of the researchers (who shall remain nameless) returned from a snorkeling foray by following an anchor line --- turned out to be the *wrong anchor line*--- back the *wrong* liveaboard. One wonders what the researcher in question was *thinking* upon discovering that the target liveaboard had a *Zodiac*, and not a *skiff*... *ahem*. Enough said on that subject! The divers on the "wrong" boat graciously offered the wayward snorkeler a chance to come aboard for a cup of tea. Naturally, the off-course snorkeler was way too humiliated to accept their gracious offer!

### And What About the Food, the Boat and the Crew?

Chef Momo really outdid himself. We all really looked forward to our meals. Working from a small galley, Momo created masterpieces, consistently earning ***Cinque Fourchettes*** (five forks, top rating!) from Guide Michelin-Lehman. Momo also went out of his way to accommodate individual dietary preferences. The food was plentiful, delicious, nutritious, healthfully prepared, and colorfully and artfully presented. Breakfasts were usually a warm bean salad, French toast, regular toast, Nutella, peanut butter, baguettes (a nod to the French influence in Djibouti), sunny side-up eggs, scrambled eggs (sometimes with sautéed veggies included), swiss cheese, Greek yoghurt, mango and orange juice, and *La Vache Qui Rit* (The Laughing Cow) spreadable cheese (great on the baguettes!). Meals reflected the French colonial heritage of Djibouti, but also borrowed from Middle Eastern cuisine and continental influences. Main dishes included beef bourguignon, Salisbury steaks with cream sauce and mushrooms, enticing meatballs, flavorful roast chicken, freshly made coleslaw, voluptuous fresh salads of every kind, homemade zucchini ratatouille side dishes; and frequently meal choices included absolutely fresh wahoo (witnessed to have been caught by the crew that very day only hours earlier!) for those who preferred not to eat meat – and even for those who do; one lunch and dinner featured lamb merguez (a classic - continued next page —



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Middle Eastern sausage—*so good !!!!*); pastas were always *perfectly* al dente with either pesto or freshly-made marina sauce; chick pea salad, and bibb lettuce with succulent tomatoes. Desserts always included fresh fruit as well as occasional treats like pears with a reduction sauce - and chocolates! *All in all, chef's hats off to Momo!*

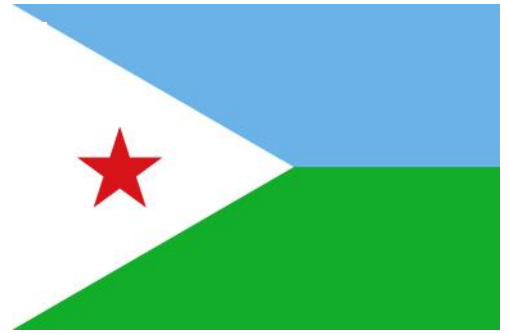
Similarly, for the crew. Everybody – including the Captain – immediately chipped in for every task at hand. All were immediately accommodating to the needs of the divers, eager to assist at every opportunity. After our dives and snorkel trips, refreshing drinks, snacks, coffee and tea were always already on the table, ready for us. Water bottles were provided for our use to reduce the use of plastic bottles, along with a water chiller, soft drinks, and excellent Ethiopian beer. Our bathrooms were cleaned daily and resupplied assiduously (ok, granted that the showers sometimes were not piping hot, especially if multiple people were showering at the same time which might reduce water pressure...but you get that on every liveboard...). We just couldn't ask for a better, more skilled, or friendlier crew! Brush up on your French if you can, although it is by no means necessary. Tipping was strictly communal. There was an envelope for Vincent, our PADI Instructor (who was also our divemaster) -- and another envelope for the crew. Tipping individual crew members was not recommended. The crew works tightly as a team and they have their own way of splitting up the tips which make their way into the envelope. It is best to respect the system which they have worked out.

Our PADI Instructor/divemaster Vincent Amelineau was pure professionalism in action – familiar with the waters, boundlessly energetic, attentive to all the varied needs of his divers, and deeply skilled at a PADI Instructor level. Many non-US divers are concerned that their divemaster will not “understand” PSI or feet vs. BAR and meters. This was definitely NOT the case with Vincent, who dives frequently with US military personnel stationed in Djibouti. Vincent is also a *superbly skilled photographer*, with captivating images of almost microscopic shrimp and colorful, alien nudibranchs – and all the way up to the majestic whale sharks! Vincent's photography strategy mirrors that of master photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa – who respectively captured ‘the decisive moment’ (**moment décisif**) -- and Capa championed and established the photojournalist principle of ‘*when you think you are close enough, walk closer*’. Vincent's underwater portraiture reveals other truths in photography – the camera is just a lump of metal and glass and in and of itself, useless -- the best and most impactful photos are always taken by those with an emotional connection to and empathy with the subject! And that is Vincent. Vincent has a goal with his incisive photography: he laments that not enough people know just how *beautiful – and how vulnerable* – our undersea environment is. He hopes that through his breathtaking photography of creatures tiny and huge, he can raise awareness and ignite a sense of awe at the world beneath the water's surface. We wish Vincent **Bon Chance** and every success, and are confident that he will make a positive difference to protect the oceans via his stunning photography.

Our boat, *M/Y Deli* had its good points and... some minor drawbacks (at least, for those passengers accustomed to and requiring the comforts of more modern and luxurious liveboards). Remember that our trip was a field marine biology mission, and not purely a leisure and pleasure diving cruise like we find on the usual scuba diving liveboard boats. Eyes wide open (continued next page)



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open on that account. The historic rainfall during the weeks prior to our arrival had at least three effects – 1) a temporary hiatus in feeding activity by the whale sharks while the water cleared of silt from rain runoff and the plankton returned (which fortunately happened progressively during our trip) 2) green plant life vigorously sprouting amongst the black and dark gray lava rock pervasive to the area and 3) ....Yes, it must be said that on this trip in certain parts of the Gulf of Tadjoura (not all), there were... some flies. The offending population was reduced in the boat by electronic zappers and fly strips when the flies appeared. Fortunately, while they did make their appearance during the day, they also all mysteriously disappeared at night. The historically intense, sustained rainfall in Djibouti in October/November 2019 in the Gulf of Tadjoura caused the temporary increase. Next year, flies might well be a total non-issue. Note that unlike other liveaboards, there is no air-conditioned common area cabin. Meals are taken al fresco – that is, outside in the open-air common area – and that is one of the great charms of this boat! Finally, recall that air-conditioning on liveaboards can be a very mixed blessing. Yes, it is lovely at first to step into a cool area - - but consider that the constant fluctuations of hot/cold/hot can trigger upper respiratory distress and head colds – which is exactly what you *don't want* on a dive trip! Good news is that air-conditioning is one thing you will not have to worry about on this trip aboard *M/Y Deli*. The boat has an excellent carbon footprint, so take pride in that! And, each mission participant is provided a personalized aluminum drinking bottle to reduce the use of plastic water bottles (I am a bit of a curious anomaly at work, because as a creature of habit I continue to use my twin Nalgene 32oz. water bottles each and every day...).

*M/Y Deli* is an easy-going boat. Nobody cares if you wear the same shorts a couple of times. *Deli* has an open cockpit, and a common space with communal electrical recharging stations (protected by windows). Cabins were reasonably spacious, but many of us chose to sleep up on deck! Sleeping outside, topside, with the sea air - was a magic experience. (The crew has their own area topside where they sleep). We were encouraged to bring sleeping bags to sleep on the comfortable full-length cushions on the forward deck. The below-deck cabins could be close at times, although some of the cabins were more spacious than on other liveaboards that I had been on. Each cabin had its own bathroom and shower. Sailing speed was a leisurely 7 knots. The draft is shallow, allowing *M/Y Deli* access up close and personal to the coral reefs for scuba diving and snorkeling. *Deli's* exact date of manufacture is not known by the current crew, but it was probably built in the 1960's or 70's, and was used a recreational boat for European tourists sojourning to the western and southern coast of Turkey for their scuba diving, snorkeling, swimming and coastal touring of Turkey's intensely fascinating historical sites, stretching back thousands of years in that region -- which was the human crossroads of antiquity.

Our home for the week, the *M/Y Deli*, is an ancient and enduring ship design! It is not much different than the boats being discovered in the Black Sea which are 2,500 years old. *M/Y Deli* is not a blue-water ship. This is not an ocean-going, fast and sleek Viking warship. This dhow (which in a prior life was a Turkish gulet) is designed for coastal transport of goods and people. The dhow was the trucking, train system, and internet of antiquity linking cultures and regions across the Old World. The maritime Silk Road – linking China, Southeast Asia, India, Middle East and Arabian Peninsula, Africa, Egypt and even Europe for 1,500 years since before the Common Era -- relied on these dhows. The ship design itself, and the way the ship moves “speaks” to those who listen – subtly offers its message across time and space. Despite not having some of the (continued next page)



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occasional comforts of newer, more luxurious boats, I am deeply grateful for both having had an authentic field biology research experience -- and for living topside aboard a boat unchanged in basic design from the very origins of human maritime endeavor!

### So, How Was the Diving?

The basics: the water was clear; visibility ranged up to sixty to eighty feet (but was sometimes much less owing to the abundance of plankton -- which is actually great because, after all, that is what the whale sharks are here for!); water temperature was very comfortable ranging from 70-80F, no thermoclines, and we experienced no undue currents. For many of us 1mm wetsuits were plenty; some just used dive skins and for snorkeling, a t-shirt providing sun protection is fine. For those divers who are skinny and/or get cold easily, or are doing four or more dives or water activities a day, then a 3mm might work better for them and those folks should consider wearing a dive hood. (Which is not a bad idea for *everyone*, because the sun can be fierce. THAT is why I wore my dive hood...) So, when you do go to Djibouti, be prepared! Djibouti is NOT the place to be sick or get a bad sunburn. That said, there are military infirmaries which can no doubt handle most medical emergencies, but bear in mind that those facilities are primarily in the Djibouti City area -- and our excursions and diving was somewhat far afield. There is a recompression chamber in one (or more) of the local military aid stations. Not that this would be likely to be needed; our shallow diving profiles on this mission did not call for needing to take a chamber ride.

Of course, the question might arise -- what about pelagic sea life (read that as oceanic white tips which have on occasion "complicated" diving activities further north in the Red Sea and around Sharm El Sheik. That was on my mind having seen (fortunately just indifferently patrolling) white tips off Brothers Island up near MarsaSalaam in the Red Sea off Egypt etc. If you ring the dinner bell, and competitive feeding patterns suddenly develop with multiple white tips which might converge into the area, placid patrolling can change quickly to other modes with this species. Remember that Jacques Cousteau thought that white tips are the most unpredictable and dangerous shark species as they are pelagic and are obliged to exploit the usually few-and-far-between feeding opportunities in the deep ocean. All that said, no one saw any shark species other than whale sharks, and certainly there were no white tips were spotted -- nor would we have expected to see any in the shallow and just-off-the-coast areas which were our target areas. Since there is limited tourism, there are no hotels or resorts proving food sources such as is the case near Sharm El Sheikh... so long and short -- not to worry. Except about that sunburn, or bruises from being at times unceremoniously yanked aboard the skiffs in pursuit of whale sharks!

Let's get back to the excellent diving experience! The underwater environments we explored included Ras Korali, Devils Island, Red Virgin, The Finger, Star Bay, and Turtle Point. The daily displays of marine life were splendid and extensive. Djibouti is one of the world's exceptional dive sites, undiscovered for the most part by Americans, but increasingly on the radar for Europeans. This is, in part, due to the French colonial influence for hundreds of years when Djibouti was a French colony. The word has gotten around the European dive circuit, that is for (continued next page)



## Saving Djibouti's Whale Sharks



sure. The night dives were mixed; the first one was not memorable, but subsequent night dives included numerous crabs, lobsters and crustaceans. I am not big on fish identification, but collectively we spotted moray eels, lizardfish, bannerfish, jackfish, damselfish, lionfish, triggerfish, and surgeonfish to name just a few.

There are 200 species of coral here. There were big circular table coral structures up to three meters tall. We did wall diving, reef traverse, **and THE CRACK** – the site where the African and Middle Eastern/Asian tectonic plates are separating...

Finally, the snorkeling was 'off the Richter scale' fantastic! The best snorkeling in my life was near the Red Virgin dive site. Towering pillars of coral, thousands of colorful small and medium size fish, all the usual suspects, tiny fish, big fish, tiny shrimps, lava rocks, brain corals, fans, colors, textures, and alien forms all around. Like a magical fantasy land. And the evidence of the birth of the world everywhere with the underwater lava structures. And a chasm at one of the tectonic plate separation sites which disappeared down, down, down --into blackness... This site was pristine. The snorkeling alone is worth the trip to this remote area. No garbage here. Not a single instance of a floating plastic bag... May it always be so. Jennifer explained that the unspoiled Red Virgin snorkeling site was protected by a twist of fate – the local currents divert the trash away from the area.

### **What is Djibouti City like, and What are Prospects for the Gulf of Tadjoura Area?**

Truth be told, Djibouti City is a sandy industrial port town with plenty of unpaved roads with ancient taxi cabs held together by duct tape. It is a fairly 'rough and tumble' place. The town has a 'wild west' quality which reminded me of the town *Mos Eisley* in the film *Star Wars*! The Bawadi Mall is a nice mall where you can get pretty much whatever you might need if you forgot to pack it. There is also a modern supermarket where you can stock up on whatever you might want or need before heading out to the Gulf of Tadjoura aboard the good ship *M/Y Deli*. There is an excellent Ethiopian restaurant in town called *Kokeb* which, as a long-time fan of Ethiopian food, I can attest is thoroughly authentic, delicious and inviting. There are several military installations in and around the airport, including the large US joint armed services base Camp Lemonnier – but the US forces stationed there are prohibited from leaving their base and may not venture in town. This contrasts with at least some of the other armed forces of other nations; we had German Navy and Army personnel staying at our Sheraton.

Safety in Djibouti City was similar to that in other capital cities in developing countries. The US State Department has no warnings posted for Djibouti. The only thing noted is that due to tensions with Iran, travel to the Middle East may be a higher risk than in previous years, with the advice to exercise reasonable caution. This is subject to change of course, so do be aware of current events before making plans to visit the region. There is also a \$500-\$800 per night luxury hotel. It is worth a visit, even to just to walk around the opulent lobby. Why would there be a hotel so (continued next page)



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luxurious amidst the poverty? Clearly, government and fat cats with European Union diplomatic expense accounts – with bureaucrats and technocrats vying for position and advantage -- all on expense accounts.

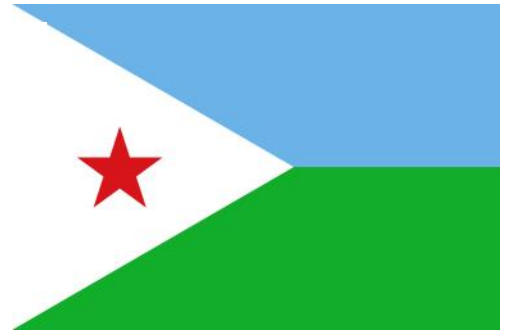
China is funding the construction of the largest airport in Africa in nearby Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Ethiopia has the second-largest population in Africa - 150 million people (slightly less than Nigeria) and is poised to become a (perhaps the) leading economic force in Africa. Ethiopia is predominantly devoutly Christian – which means that China with its increasing engagement in the region will not have to cope with a dissident religious population like the Islamic Uyghurs and indigenous peoples of the Tibetan Plateau, against whom in both cases the Chinese have and are committing cultural genocide. China has its eyes fixed on Ethiopia as the ‘jewel in the crown’ and ‘diamond-in-the-rough’ of Africa -- just as Western powers did in the colonial era. Ethiopia is adjacent to Djibouti, and thus achieving a stronger presence in transportation in both Ethiopia and Djibouti will mean that China will start getting the inside track to benefit maximally from the economic development of East and Central Africa which China is facilitating via infrastructure development. Many other countries as noted already are present and entrenched, but China is ratcheting up its presence in every respect. China is also building a permanent and major military base on the northeastern edge of the Gulf of Tadjoura at the former French port of Obock. (This is one of the most strategic spots in the world). This military installation will protect and secure rising Chinese regional influence while other powers, such as the United States, scale back. China is also currently the world leader in infrastructure development and has an initiative for development in LDC’s which it calls “Belt and Road”, which includes containership seaport operations. China is very focused, building relationships to get permits from local authorities for port and infrastructure development. Dr. Schmidt advises that there is a new Chinese-built port on the north shore of the gulf near Tadjoura, as well as a Chinese-built railway linking Djibouti with Ethiopia. All over the world in LDC’s, China is grabbing the initiative for infrastructure development from Western powers. With policies such as “America First”, we can expect that the US in the immediate future at least will not contest these powerful and determined Chinese initiatives.

All of this may not bode well for the whale sharks of the Gulf of Tadjoura. I think it is fair to say that the wellbeing of the local population of whale sharks is just about the last thing on the mind of Chinese leadership in so far as the Gulf of Tadjoura whale shark population is concerned. (...Except that is, for an occasional bouillabaisse featuring whale shark fin...) The Chinese port being built at the western end of the Gulf of Tadjoura will circumvent the lengthy and torturous road from the western end of the Gulf to the container port at Djibouti City (which the Chinese are seeking to also manage). Construction of this major container port at the western terminus of the Gulf will require blasting channels through the undersea lava beds to enable containerships (and possibly in the future the 1,000’ foot long super-container ships) with deep draft access. The plankton, krill, and small fish upon which the whale sharks feed is thus threatened. Life finds a way is true -- but in some cases the challenge might prove unsurmountable. Time will tell....

What a tragedy if these whale sharks, which have traversed this area for perhaps 20 million years, are extirpated in the next 30 years. (Or in the next three years, who knows...). For as the plankton



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goes, so go the whale sharks of the Gulf of Tadjoura. The whale sharks had a tough time dealing with the silt runoff from just a few weeks of heavy rain. What chance will they have from blasting lava rock with shock waves reverberating throughout the Gulf, and the potential at least of a permanent, choking, black shroud of underwater lava rock dust floating, settling and moving around in the Gulf of Tadjoura? What effect will the blasting have on the lateral lines of these whale sharks? Will the whale sharks come back? Will there be food around in the sea to attract them? Will the undersea environment prove resilient, survive and recover? Have there been any diligent environmental impact studies done? Who did them? How big a priority are the whale sharks for the Djibouti government, all things considered? Are there any precedent port construction projects worldwide from which to draw any estimates of environmental impact? Sometimes even worst-case scenarios of expected environmental recovery rates prove optimistic in retrospect, as is the case with the Exxon Valdez disaster. Economic development certainly brings income and jobs to locals. But it can and too often does also destroy the very things which ecotourists have come to see. Sadly, economic development has the potential to damage and degrade – and possibly destroy -- the very waters which spawned life on Earth. Obscenely, this environmental atrocity is happening near the very birthplace of our species where Australopithecus first emerged from predecessor primates on the path towards our current form, Homo Sapiens... The exact region where one containerport is being built is Ghoubbet al-Kharab (قبة الخراب "the Gulf of the Demons"). The dominating geological feature is the erosion resistant basaltic monadnock called Devil's Island. How very aptly named... *With all this in mind, now would be a very good time to start making plans for the 2020 whale shark trip... Contact SRI or see them at the Beneath The Sea (BTS) consumer dive expo in March at the Secaucus, NJ Expo Center!*

### **Bon Chance Mes Amis au SRI !! (Good Luck and Every Success to Shark Research Institute !! )**

SRI's mission on behalf of the whale sharks in the Gulf of Tadjoura will light the paths forward for both local and worldwide protection of whale sharks. SRI's advocacy for whale shark will mitigate threats to the species in the Gulf area. TSSC wishes Bon Chance (Every Success!) to Dr. Schmidt and her teams work on behalf of whale sharks, now and in the future. Dr. Schmidt's collaborators in Djibouti are Dr. David Robinson from Sharkwatch Arabia and Dr. Ginevra Boldrocchi from the University of Insubria. Jennifer led us on a fantastic adventure; we have learned a great deal; we have contributed to the protection of this species and each of us were, even though only for a short time, marine biology warriors-- and now lifelong advocates for whale sharks. For more information about Shark Research Institute, find out about their other programs and shark missions by visiting their richly informative website at <https://www.sharks.org/> .

## Whale Sharks Facts

Dr Simon J Pierce is a marine biologist, nature writer, wildlife photographer and co-founder/Principal Scientist (Global Whale Shark Program) at the [Marine Megafauna Foundation](#). Following are some whale shark facts excerpted from his excellent column at <https://mailchi.mp/scubadivingresource/w7b3ltjelb-750451?e=8e010b7fd1>.

- Whale sharks are the Earth's largest fish
- One shark caught off Taiwan was 20 m length and 34 tons
- Bigger even than *Megalodon*, fossil-record predicts maximum of 18 meters
- Whale sharks are filter-feeders with a softball-sized throat, feeding off shrimp, tuna eggs, krill, copepods, crab larvae... all collectively known as "zooplankton", as well as small fish
- A medium-sized whale shark can eat about 142.5 kg (~ 300 LBS) of tuna eggs/DAY
- Whale sharks migrate heavily; sharks routinely travel over 10,000 km each year, and return to favorite locations
- They possess uncanny navigation skills and unerringly zero in on known feeding events, probably using the Earth's magnetic fields to navigate
- Shark excreta return nutrients to the open ocean, and whale shark carcasses feed bottom-dwelling organisms for perhaps years
- Sharks dive deep-- recorded depths up to 1,928 meters!
- They prefer warm, tropical waters – but – can function at depth with temperatures just above freezing (because they can retain heat)
- Their exoskeleton is up to 30cm thick, assisting with heat retention
- Predators include orcas, but whale shark pups are vulnerable to a wide variety of predators
- Known feeding areas generally are frequented only by juvenile whale sharks, and it is speculated that adults remain in the deep ocean feeding
- Whale sharks grow very slowly, and can live a long life – up to 130 years !

Over 8,000 tourists and researchers have submitted photos to a global sighting database ([www.whaleshark.org](http://www.whaleshark.org)), identifying over 10,000 individuals

*Now that you know a bit about whale sharks, it will be distressing to learn that Over half the global population has been killed since the 1980's. All the more reason therefore to support organizations engaged in their protection and researching them before it is too late ...*





## Saving Djibouti's Whale Sharks



**Top Left to Bottom Right...** Dr. Schmidt reviewing data with researchers; *Rhincodon typus* (whale shark); Djibouti wedding reception at Sheraton; Lac Assal region in Djibouti (lowest point in Africa, MINUS 509 ft below sea-level. Gary has been to HIGHEST point in Africa (Mt. Kilimanjaro at 19,341 ft. AND the LOWEST point in Africa, Lac Assal...); Vincent Amelineau PADI Instructor and mission dive master; the tragic scene of a decomposing whale shark ensnared by fishing lines; and finally our good ship *M/V Deli* , our home for the week of whale sharking !

# And Around The Dive Shop.....

## LOCAL DIVE SHOPS.....AT YOUR SERVICE!

*Looking for dive-related gifts? Need to upgrade your gear?*

*Here is a list of shops that may just have the right one for your best dive buddy or for yourself!*

 <p><b>Ski and Scuba Connection</b> 26 Saint Roch Ave Greenwich, CT 06830 Tel. 203-629-4766 www.skiandscubaconnection.com</p>	 <p><b>SCUBA NEW YORK</b> 2037 Central Park Ave Yonkers, NY 10710 Tel. 914-779-2966 and 2672 Gerritsen Ave Brooklyn, NY 11229 Tel. 718-769-0099 www.scubany.com</p>
 <p><b>Abyss Scuba</b> Where the fun begins! www.abyss-scuba.net (914) 244-3483 29 Marble Avenue, Pleasantville, NY 10570</p>	 <p><b>Captain Mike's Diving School</b> 530 City Island Ave City Island, NY 10464 Tel. 718-885-1588 www.captainmikesdiving.com</p>
 <p><b>Oceanblue Dive</b> 108 Bedford Street Stamford, CT, 06901 www.oceanbluedive.com</p>	



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