

Valerie and Ron.
A lifetime dedicated
to the preservation of
our oceans' marine life

Text by Mathias Carvalho
Photos courtesy of Ron and Valerie Taylor,
and *Blue Water, White Death*

Valerie Taylor, along with her husband Ron, are two of the true pioneers of underwater photo and video, since their debut in the 1960s. Their efforts brought the wonders of the blue oceans to our households, through footage acquired for several TV and film productions. Ron and Valerie are especially renowned worldwide for their specialization in getting images of the shark in its habitat. Always ahead of the latest technology, they adopted the use of DV cameras and decks, adding to their vast portfolio of professional film and analog video footage. Valerie was kind enough to offer me some insights, on this brief interview, after their return from a long expedition to Indonesia.



A talk with the **Taylors**

XRM: I am sure that you have both heard this question before, but for our readers' benefit, how did you two begin diving with sharks? And, why sharks, specifically?

Valery Taylor: We started out as spear fishing champions. In those days, there were plenty of sharks, and they were attracted to

our speared fish. Ron started filming them in 16mm because he found that the footage could be sold first to Movietone news for their news reels they used to screen before the main feature film, then to TV when it arrived in Australia in 1956. Shark footage sold, and we needed money.

XRM: You were the first to actually document sharks in their natural habitat. What was the general public's reaction to that?

Valery Taylor: Yes, we were. The public thought we were mad, but they loved our images. We learned a great deal about sharks in a very short time. This was back in





Hundreds of sharks gathering into a lagoon pass in French Polynesia

The Taylors

ting out of the cages among hundreds of large, dangerous Oceanic White Tips feeding on a harpooned whale. I truly believed that one or more of us could not survive. An odd thing, I felt no fear, just aggression.

XRM: How hard is it to photograph sharks underwater? They must be hard to find, let alone get close to.

Valery Taylor: Because of over harvesting, they are getting hard to find. For many species, we use baits to attract

the late 1950s and early 1960s.

“Blue Water, White Death was the greatest adventure of our lives.”

XRM: “Blue Water White Death”—was it what actually put the Taylors in the limelight, with your first hit? What was it like?

Valery Taylor: BWWD was the

greatest adventure of our lives. It not only made us famous as divers, it also was very instrumental in teaching other divers that it was possible to work with potentially dangerous sharks in their natural environment.

XRM: Any memorable moments in that expedition?

Valery Taylor: The whole expedition was memorable, but I think the biggest adrenalin hit was get-



them to our cameras, otherwise they would either swim over for a quick look or simply swim past ignoring us. A hunk of tuna tied to the reef will keep them interested as long as it lasts, which is generally not long. To overcome this, we would have the tuna frozen hard. The sharks take much longer to eat a frozen fish.

XRM: So, your next major role in movie making

Valerie arm-wrestling with a shark—“Thank God for those gauntlets”—still the most successful protection outside a metal cage against dangerous sharks

FAR LEFT: Blacktip sharks—they rarely will attack divers—a media boosted myth



water housings with special ports for wide angle lenses. It is important when filming sharks to have equipment that works well every time.

XRM: On the negative side, the JAWS series made everyone afraid of sharks everywhere. How harmful was its effect on the public opinion? Or has it had not much effect at all?

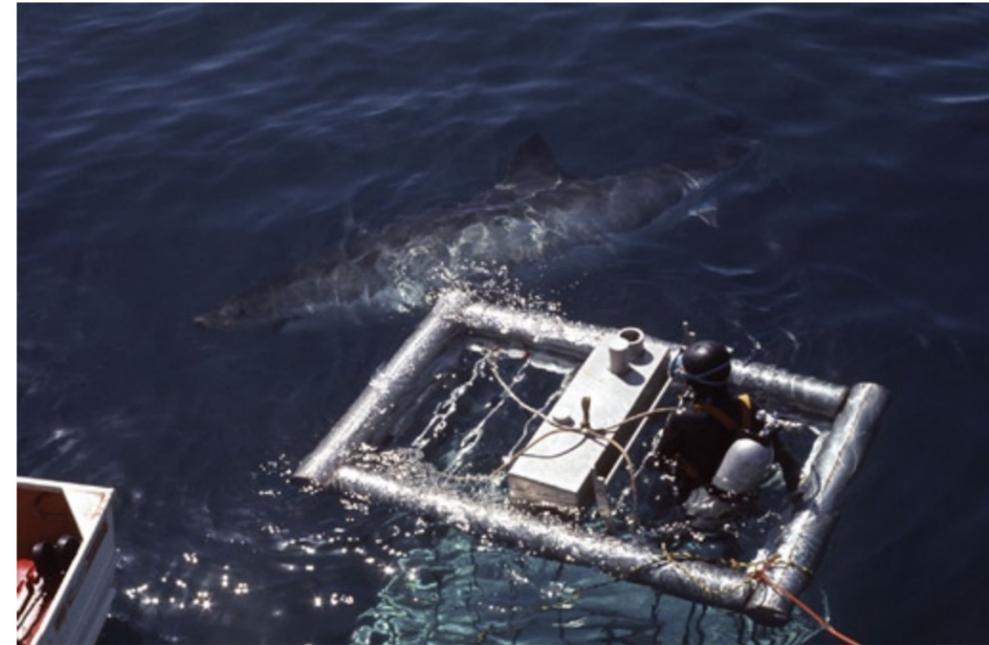
Valery Taylor: Peter Benchley, Universal Pictures, and us were all amazed at the public reaction to the film. It was a fictitious story about a fictitious shark. No one ever expected the bad and very unjust publicity regarding sharks that followed. You do not worry about King Kong when you visit New York, so

be regarded as true, which illustrates the incredible power of suggestion the media can have. Even today, people come up to us and say they will never swim in the ocean again because they saw JAWS.

XRM: Does shark photogra-

phy and videography play a key role in the preservation effort today? How?

Valery Taylor: Of all the hundreds of shark species found world wide, there are only six or seven species potentially danger-



was as the technical underwater crew in JAWS 2. What can you tell us about that experience, moving from documentaries to a blockbuster?

Valery Taylor: We had already worked on several feature films. We thought *Jaws* would be a sort of B class movie, but it was good money, and the people we worked with were fabulous.

At the time, Ron shot enough footage for *Jaws 2* as well as the first one, which turned into the blockbuster. We were employed originally to shoot the live shark footage for *Jaws*, a story written by Peter Benchley. Although we were taken to Marthers Vinyard where the main unit was filming, Ron shot all the live shark footage off South Australia.

XRM: What filming techniques did you use, and what did you have to come up with?

Valery Taylor: Ron used a 35mm camera in an underwater housing he made himself. Ron is very clever at making things. He makes all our underwater housings, and they are far better than any we could buy. He is still making them, and my latest digital camera housing makes other underwater photographers envious.

XRM: Ron, you are a pioneer of underwater housing for cameras. Did you apply any of your inventions during the film?

Ron Taylor: I used two of my own self-designed and constructed 35mm under-

why worry about a fictitious shark off the local beach?

We feel the adverse reaction was caused by the human race having an instinctive fear of being eaten alive. Sharks do—on rare occasions—bite people, but we are not their natural prey. Unlike the monster in *JAWS*, sharks do not swim around looking for people to eat. If they did, no one could ever go into the ocean without serious risks.

XRM: Was the result a direct hit on the new discoveries about sharks that you and other professionals were making?

Valery Taylor: I do not think *Jaws* had anything to do with new discoveries about sharks. It had more to do with how a well-presented film can

A White Shark inspects the diver's cage in South Australia—size does matter. All photos this page courtesy of *Blue Water, White Death*



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The Taylors

ries like shark fin soup. Interestingly, this soup has no taste. It is more of a texture, as the flavor is added.

The sale of shark fin soup should be banned in all western countries, the same as with tigers claws and elephant tusks. The harvesting of sharks for their fins should be outlawed but, even as I write, the Queensland Government in Australia

is giving commercial fishermen permission to long line for sharks inside our Great Barrier Reef Marine Parks. It seems incredible that a fish that has survived for hundreds of millions of years can be hunted almost to extinction in a few decades.

XRM: What else can be done, especially if one isn't a shark spe-

ous to humans.

Depicting sharks via the media as they really are has, over many years, given the public a different view of sharks in general and some, such as the Grey Nurse (Sand Tiger), in particular.

Sharks have always fascinated people, but because of television, much more is known about them. Children are always asking us questions about sharks. Never about corals or fish.

and the fins dried out for sale in Hong Kong and Singapore. The dried fin of say a Whale Shark is worth about \$1,000 US on the Hong Kong market. Wealthy Chinese buy these big fins to celebrate a wedding or a special event.

As the Chinese become more affluent, many more of them will be able to afford such luxu-

XRM: So, sharks have benefited from an increasing number of educational and protection campaigns all over the world. But we see that they are at the top of the list of oceanic endangered species. Why is that?

Valery Taylor: The Chinese lust for shark fin soup. Sharks are hunted world wide for their fins. The body is generally dumped,

THIS PAGE: Valerie inspects a dead victim of a whaling fleet still run by Norwegians—wailing still kills hundreds every year. All photos this page are courtesy of Blue Water, White Death





Ron filming some clever sea lions. U/W technology proven on the field

cialist? How can the rest of us contribute?

Valery Taylor: Not much really. Sharks are very much an endangered species and will be hunted until it is no longer viable, which means, there are too few left. Banning fining in the territorial waters off your coast would be a big help, but controlling poachers is very hard and convincing governments even harder.

XRM: What campaigns, projects or associations are you affiliated with?

Too many to name. I am the New South Wales patron of National Parks Marine Association in Australia. And we belong to many other organizations trying to protect sharks. If they all got together and formed a huge group, they could make a difference, but this is unlikely to happen.

You know the saying, "united we stand, separate we fall"? In a world where countries cannot even agree on a standard for power outlets, how can they ever come together on protecting sharks?

One good example is whaling. Whales are incredible animals.

"We now have a marine world as man has made it, not as nature intended it to be."

Everyone loves them, but there are dozens of countries where they hunt them without punishment and in the cruelest of fashions.

XRM: Can you tell us about your current projects?

Valery Taylor: About to write a book. We keep filming and taking photographs. Goodness, we just keep on doing what we have always done. Dive, eat, dive, eat, sleep...

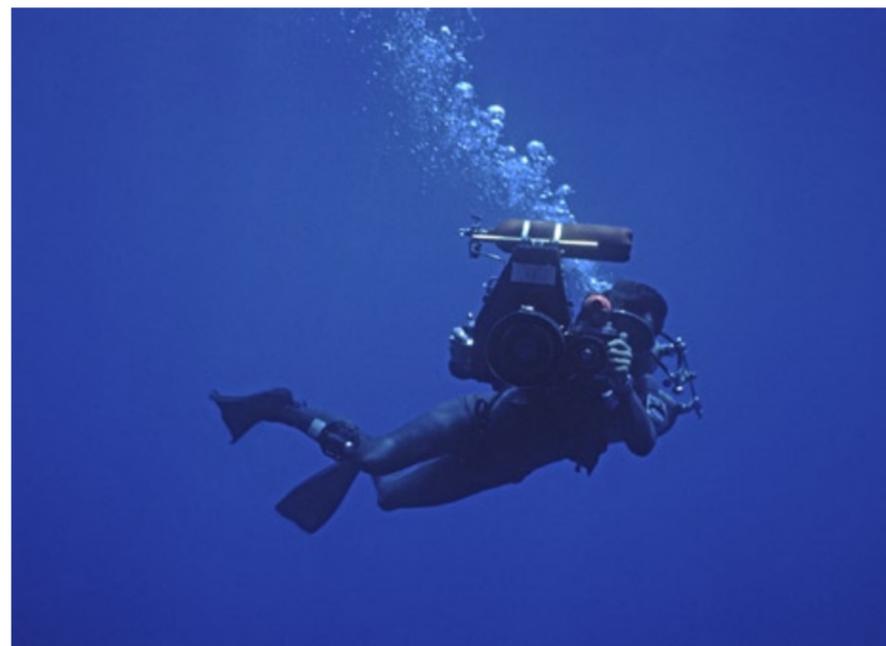
XRM: What does the future has in store for us, regarding the protection of the oceans?

Valery Taylor: In my option, it is doomed. Look what we, the so-called civilized countries, have done and knowingly continue to do with this most precious resource. When India and China catch up with us, and they already have, it will be the death knoll for the remaining eatable life in the ocean.

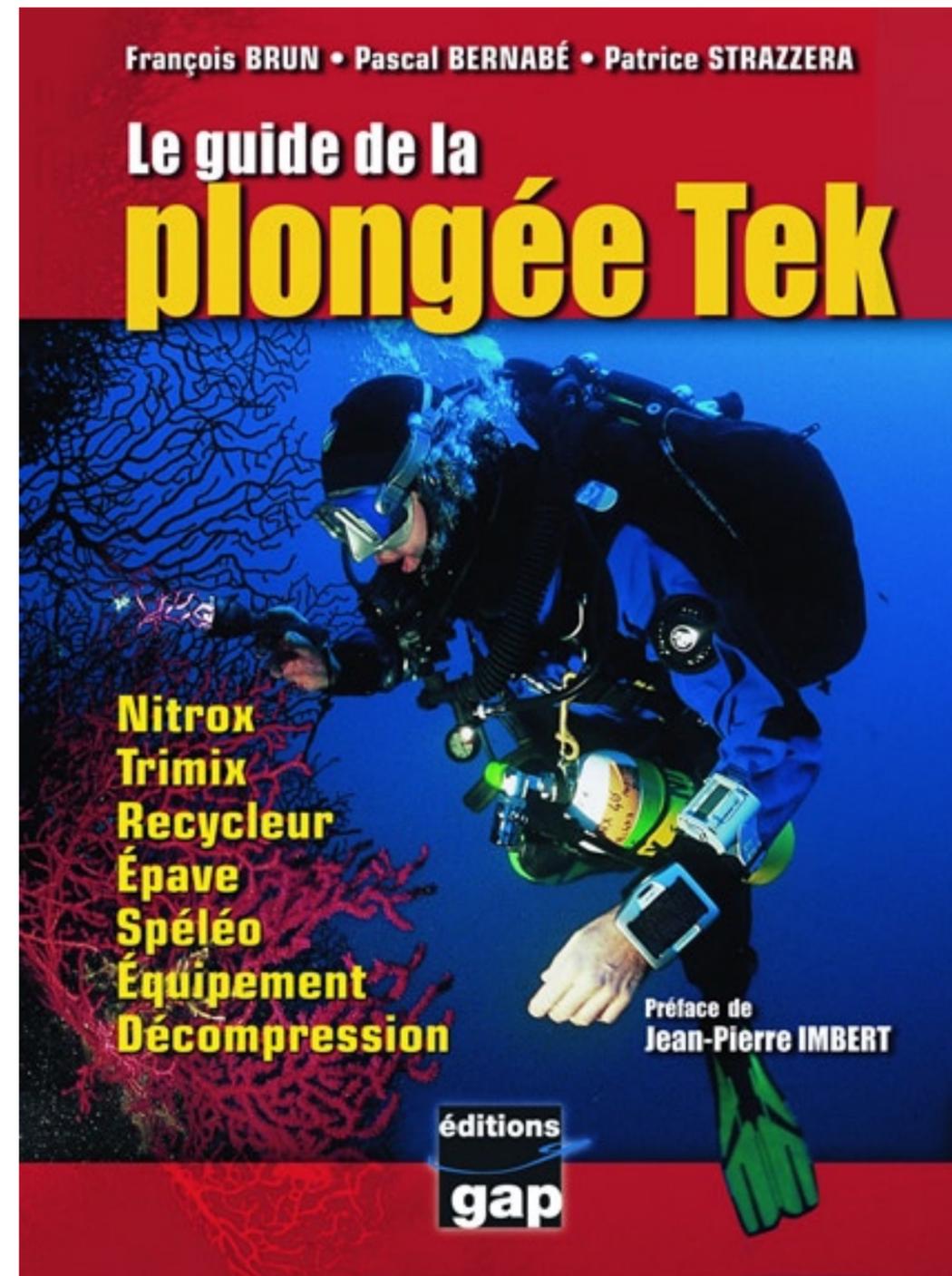
The biggest problem is that the marine animals

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are free for the taking. They do not have to be farmed, just harvested. No one has to clear the land or grow the crops to feed the farm animals, nature has already done that. Fishermen take away and put nothing back. The ocean, as we knew it in our youth, has gone. We now have a marine world as man has made it, not as nature intended it to be. ■



RIGHT: Ron with one of his homemade camera housings— ahead of his time. Photo courtesy of *Blue Water, White Death*



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