

turtle tales



Edited by
Bonnie McKenna

Loggerhead
sea turtle



Researchers track marine turtle movements

A team from the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom has monitored the movements, for the first time, of an entire sub-population of loggerhead sea turtles.

The study confirmed that using satellite tracking the day-to-day lives of marine turtles can be monitored and their migrations can be accurately predicted.

The findings reveal that, despite travelling thousands of miles every year, the turtles rarely leave the waters of the United States or the continental shelf. It is this discovery that can directly lead to conservation efforts.

The monitoring project focused on adult females that nest along the coasts of North Carolina and Georgia. It showed that the turtles forage in shallow warm waters off the east coast of the United States. The study also revealed that the turtles traveled as far north as New Jersey, then head south to avoid the cold winter waters.

Dr Lucy Hawkes, who participated in the study, said, "This is the first time, to our knowledge, that anyone has been able to say precisely where and when you would find an entire sub-population of marine turtles. This is incredibly useful for

conservation as it tells us exactly where to put our efforts. We knew that satellite tracking was a valuable tool, but this study highlights how powerful it is...without it we would still be guessing where these beautiful but vulnerable creatures live."

Dr Brenden Godley who led the team has been using satellite tracking to monitor sea turtles since 1977 said, "These findings form a valuable resource for conservation groups who are concerned with protecting turtles from threats posed by fishing, pollution and climate change." ■

Sea turtle dies after swallowing 317 pieces of plastic

A dead green sea turtle that washed up on the shores of New South Wales, Australia, earlier this month was found to have hundreds of

pieces of

plastic in its digestive tract. Plastic bags, small lids and even lollipop sticks were among the 317 pieces of plastic removed from the turtle.

Rochelle Ferris and her team of volunteers at Australian Seabird Rescue said that this was the worst case she has seen in 15 years.

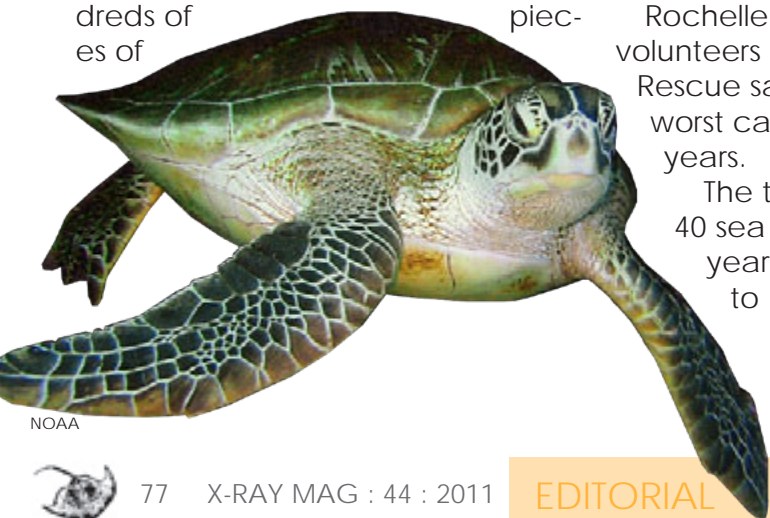
The team responds to about 40 sea turtle strandings each year that are directly related to plastic ingestion.

A recent study by the

University of Queensland said that approximately 36 percent of sea turtles are affected by marine debris, such as plastic.

The death of this turtle demonstrates the negative impact we have on our ocean friends. Remember the three Rs: Reduce, Reuse, Recycle.

To watch Ferris discuss the incident as well as larger issues, go to: www.abc.net.au/local/videos/2011/06/30/3257970.htm?site=northcoast. ■



Green sea turtle

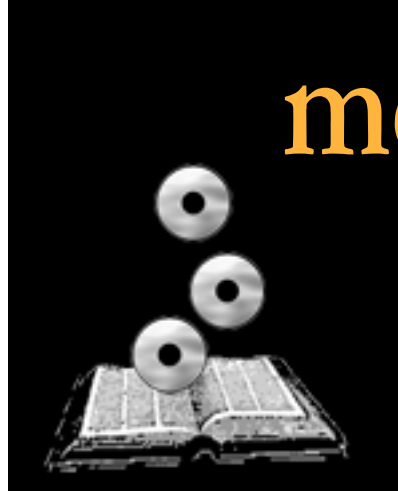
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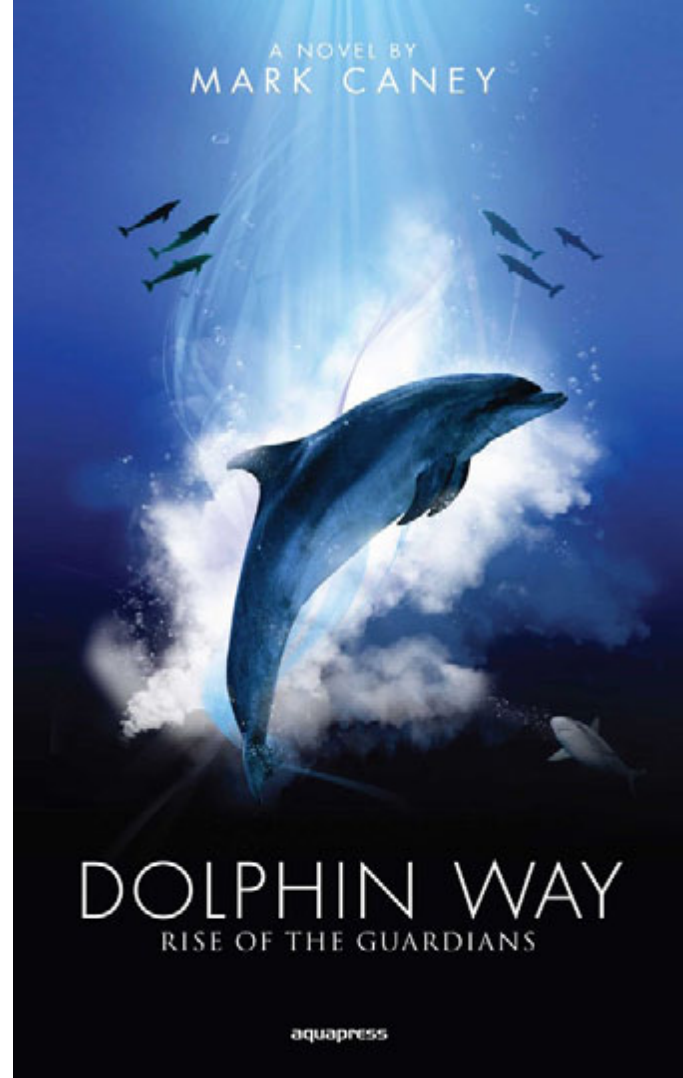
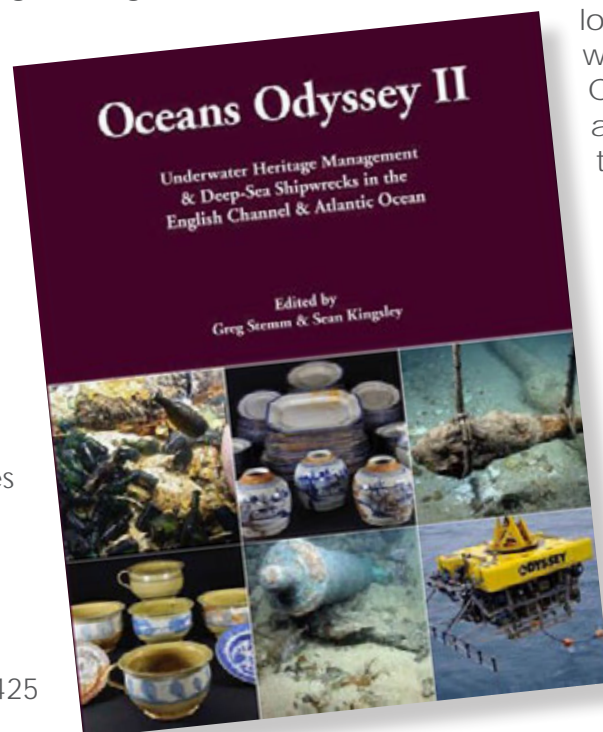
Oceans Odyssey 2

—*Underwater Heritage Management and Deep-Sea Shipwrecks in the English Channel and Atlantic Ocean*

Edited by Greg Stemm and Sean Kingsley

Oceans Odyssey 2 includes archaeological and historical information about the advanced technology and methodology used by Odyssey to discover 17th-19th century shipwrecks such as the Royal Navy First Rate warship Balchin's Victory, a mid-17th century merchantman carrying elephant tusks, the mid-18th century French privateer La Marquise de Tourny, and the mid-19th century US schooner Jacksonville "Blue China" wreck. Several papers in the new book explore the artifact collections found on these sites, detailing their significance in history. Odyssey's extensive research, documentation and publications have helped answer questions such as why certain ships sank and the commercial background of the cargos aboard these ships.

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has to face the worst punishment his clan can inflict. As his life deteriorates he is unwillingly forced into a situation where he alone can stop the dolphins' utopia from falling apart and save the one he loves. To get your hands on this first edition of 'Dolphin Way' (£12.99, ISBN: 978-1-90549-223-7) log onto Amazon, AquaPress' website or buy it direct from www.dolphin-way.com/the-book/ and find out for yourself why the Whale & Dolphin Conservation Society stated that this is "a superbly plotted, accomplished and entertaining novel, with a powerful environmental message, describing the intolerable pressure from man's destruction of the dolphin's world".

Dolphin Way

Author: Mark Caney

Dolphin Way (www.facebook.com/DolphinWay) is set in a World that is rich in detail and history, where dolphins have followed their own belief system (the Way) for thousands of years. The Way is a cross between a religion and a philosophy, where dolphins live in harmony with Ocean, their name for planet Earth. But in recent years the dolphins have observed the concord has changed, and there are sinister consequences. One of the dolphins -Touches The Sky - finds himself caught up in trying to stop this perfect world unravelling and as result

Pearls of the Caribbean HD

Diving guide and travel companion to three very different Caribbean destinations made my X-Ray contributor Steve Jones:

According to its description on iTunes it's yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum as this app takes you on a journey both above and below water through three of the Caribbean's finest destinations: Dominica, St Lucia and St Vincent. It's not by chance that the producers of the Pirates of the Caribbean movies chose these destinations as filming locations, yet the real treasures here are to be found beneath the waves. This application is a companion aimed at scuba divers but will also be of use to those that prefer to stay on dry land. It provides important information on dive centers, dive sites, weather conditions, as well as all the local information you need to ensure you make the right choices.

itunes.apple.com

Demon Fish

—*Travels Through the Hidden World of Sharks*

Author: Juliet Eilperin

A group of traders huddles around a pile of dried shark fins on a gleaming white floor in Hong Kong. A Papua New Guinean elder shoves off in his hand-carved canoe, ready to summon a shark with ancient magic. A scientist finds a rare shark in Indonesia and forges a deal with villagers so it and other species can survive.

In this eye-opening adventure that spans the globe, Juliet Eilperin investigates the fascinating ways different individuals and cultures relate to the ocean's top predator. Along the way, she reminds us why, after millions of years, sharks remain among nature's most awe-inspiring creatures.

From Belize to South Africa, from Shanghai to Bimini, we see that sharks are still the object of an obsession that may eventually lead to their extinction. This is why movie stars and professional athletes go shark hunting in Miami and why shark's fin soup remains a coveted status symbol in China. Yet we also see glimpses of how people and sharks can exist alongside one another: surfers tolerating their presence off



Cape Town and ecotourists swimming with sharks that locals in the Yucatán no longer have to hunt.

With a reporter's instinct for a good story and a scientist's curiosity, Eilperin offers us an up-close understanding of these extraordinary, mysterious creatures in the most entertaining and illuminating shark encounter you're likely to find outside a steel cage.

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Wolfgang Leander

Text by Arnold Weisz

Photos courtesy of Wolfgang Leander

Sharkman Wolfgang Leander has taken on legendary status in the diving world with his intimate work with sharks of all kinds. X-RAY MAG's Arnold Weisz talks with the conservationist to find out the story behind the legend.

captions this page...

WL: No, they are not. However, sharks are wild animals and should be treated with much respect. Even harmless shark accidents typically get a media coverage that is way out of perspective. So, many people still believe that sharks are out to attack people indiscriminately. That, of course, is not the case at all. I do feel quite relaxed and comfortable swimming with a "pack" of large sharks commonly, and wrongly, referred to as "man-eaters". Humans are not on the

but intuitively I believe to have some sensitivity for animals. I was, and am, always circumspect in the presence of sharks, and I observe their body language in different circumstances keenly. Sharks are normally shy animals, and they all have their own personalities as is the case with any other animals. You have to know that. With the first hand knowledge I have acquired over the years, I can tell in what mood a shark is. Few are bold or you might even say aggressive; that, however, very much depends on circumstances. In general, sharks are quite predictable - but you have to know their behavior intimately.

How can you learn that? It's rather easy. Sharks have a distinctive body-language; you have to learn it pretty much like any other foreign language, except that you don't have to struggle with grammar, syntax, and other linguistic requirements. One talent in learning shark body language is, however, crucial: You have to have a sharp and deductive sense of observation.

AW: You freedive rather than scuba dive. What is the reason for this?

menu of sharks. Contrary to the widely accepted belief, they are not attracted by human blood. So, if you bleed underwater, and sharks are around, you have nothing to fear: your blood will not incite them to bite you

AW: Tell us a bit more about your learning experience swimming with sharks.

WL: I am not a shark behaviorist

unfortunately, are still being portrayed, I considered them to be "dangerous" like everybody else and would have killed them with a powerhead, or bang-stick, without remorse. Now, I would not allow anyone in my presence to be rough to a shark, let alone kill it.

AW: Would you then say that sharks are not dangerous predators, not even potentially?

bad about it in retrospect as all diving pioneers did the same thing. Hans Hass, for instance, would spear moray-eels, rays, and nurse sharks for the heck of it. Today, I share the preoccupation of most experts about the health of the oceans that is at risk. Take sharks: Before getting to know them from personal experience, and realizing that their true nature has nothing to do with the way they have been, and

prevailing zeitgeist vis-a-vis the oceans, as it were: In the fifties and sixties, for example, the abundance of marine life seemed to be as endless as the surface of the seven seas. Nobody would have imagined that overfishing and pollution could ever become an issue of concern.

I started diving at age fourteen as a spearfisherman, and would catch almost anything that moved. Mind you: I don't feel

AW: How did it all start?

WL: Almost 65 years ago when I was six and saw the first images of adventurous helmet divers and what was then considered "monsters" of the deep: Sharks, killer whales, giant squids. My passion for the submarine world has not diminished, it was transformed with the passage of time. I guess my relationship with the Big Blue always reflected the



Leander



WL: Everybody asks me this question, understandably so, when it seems to be logical to scuba dive as it allows you to stay down, deep and long. My answer is simple: I don't like having cumbersome equipment on my body; it makes me feel as a stranger in the underwater world. I rather hold my breath than breathing underwater. Depending on the technique you apply, you can have the sensation of being slightly intoxicated by a rush of euphoria not comparable to any other "good" feeling. And I am

not talking about free-diving as an extreme sport.

I freedive because it gives me the feeling of freedom; it is a mental exercise more than a physical challenge. Philosophically speaking, freediving allows me to feel one with nature much more intensely than being on land which is my habitat. There is also a practical reason that speaks for freediving: Freedivers find it normally easier to get close to, and interact with, large animals than scuba divers. I have dived only four times with tanks

back in the sixties - didn't find it appealing. I began to dive as a freediver, and I will end my life as a freediver.

AW: What was your first close encounter in open water with a big shark like?

WL: Believe it or not, I wasn't terrified or anything like that as I didn't feel threatened despite all we knew in those days about sharks. I was spearfishing in the British Virgin Islands, in the fall of 1968, all by myself which is what I

always do, when I saw this mighty 12 ft shark swimming by about 12-15ft below me. I was going down to target a nicely sized mackerel with my gun, and as the shark suddenly appeared in my field of vision, I stopped moving so as to not get it interested in me. From the way it swam I immediately realized that the shark didn't mind my presence at all. I was relieved but as you can imagine, I was totally captivated by the sight of that huge shark, and just marveled at it as it slowly vanished into the blueish mist.

The shark did not come back; I was glad but at the same time I wished it would have returned... I relived this brief encounter before going to sleep that night over and over again, as if to try to preserve that magic moment I had waited so long for it to finally happen.

AW: What is it, deep down, that fascinates you about these animals (sharks)?

WL: Deep down? Hmm. Let me think..... I'd say it's a combination of several factors: it's the knowledge that sharks are very ancient, and at the same time contemporary creatures that have adapted to their environment in a most extraordinary manner; you could say they are

the paradigm of evolution; no other highly developed species in our planet has survived more than 400 millions of years. Sharks remind us that we are late comers, and that we should not take ourselves too seriously. I guess that I also feel, perhaps a bit morbidly, attracted to them because of the excitement of facing an animal that could, technically, devour you. To be eaten alive by a wild animal was a real threat in the dawn of human pre-history.

I am convinced that we carry this deep-seated fear in our

genes, a fear that is archaic but quite real in the sense that we are not only relentless conquerors of the unknown but at the same time fearful or at least apprehensive of the dangers that lurk behind the horizon or in the depths of the oceans. There are many, many people who feel something similar about sharks but find it difficult, as I do, to describe. These creatures somehow seem to touch very deep layers of our own evolutionary make-up. I don't know.... Does this make any sense to you?

AW: I guess it does.... Let us touch a rather touchy subject. Some animal activists think it is wrong to touch or feed wild animals. We know you do it. Can you tell us why?

WL: I am glad you broached the subject as I am fully aware it is a controversial one. To begin with, I like to touch people I like, and the same goes for animals. It is not an unusual sight to see me petting a stray dog in the streets of my hometown Cochabamba. I don't think an animal protector would criticize me for expressing my feelings for a creature physically. I pet sharks because I like them, I have also petted octopuses, as gently as I would pet my grandson Wolfie. Octopuses are, by the way, most tender, playful, and intelligent animals. Once you get to know them it is hard not to fall in love with them.

Animals in general, wild and domesticated, are very sensitive and responsive to physical contact. I see nothing wrong with touching a shark if you do it gently. As long as you don't hurt

the shark, or scare it deliberately by being rough, you do not harm it. If others think differently, well, that's their view. To me his is not a matter of ethics, as some animal protectors would claim, but a personal decision to express affection. The same is true of feeding. I don't see what could be wrong feeding a shark? Because you risk being nipped? Or because it could alter their feeding habits – which, by the way, has yet to be proven. Well, again, the choice is yours.

I do not encourage others to pet a shark – I have had a long training interacting with sharks, and began touching them as I got to know them better and better. Thus, I do not consider it to be risky at all. However, I won't put on underwater rodeo shows as some do, also I don't want to demonstrate how "macho" I am interacting closely with sharks. If I want to prove anything at all, it is to show that sharks are amenable animals, and definitely not aggressive toward humans.

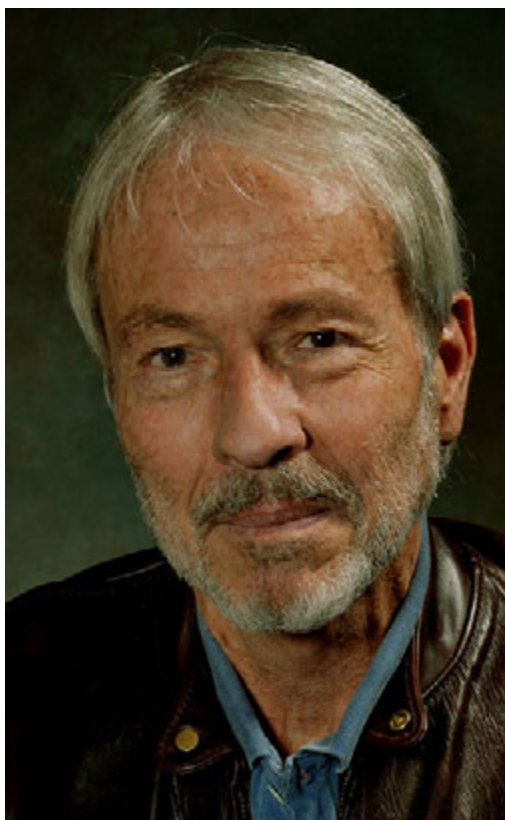
AW: Shark diving has become a popular «product» offered by many dive centers around the world. What are your reflections around this?

WL: There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. Quite the contrary. Sharks are still shrouded in an aura of mystery. Shark diving has turned countless divers into informed individuals with a new, caring outlook on sharks. I am very pleased to see that more and more people dive with sharks and, thus, find out for themselves how incredibly beautiful and vulnerable these animals are. Although there is a growing

awareness of the tremendous pressure many sharks species are exposed to due to overfishing, we need more shark ambassadors to actively engage in conservation matters.

AW: It seems that shark protection is getting more traction even within political establishments, and more and more countries are taking measures to save these animals from extinction. Why do you think it is so difficult to protect sharks?

WL: As in other complex situations, especially when they have a global dimension, there are too many conflicting interests to provide you with an easy answer. I can only highlight some of the problems concerning this issue. Shark fishing, uncontrolled as it is, is a huge business world-wide. Sharks are being killed to a very large extent for their fins to satisfy the growing demand for shark



fin soup, as you know. By now it is general knowledge amongst politicians that the populations of many shark species are extremely vulnerable to overfishing. Why? Basically because sharks mature slowly, and give birth to only a few young at a time.

Tens of millions of sharks are being killed every year, and in many countries the sharks being "harvested" for human consumption are getting smaller and smaller, long before they reach sexual maturity. It is not difficult to imagine how negatively this will affect the populations of sharks. It is also common knowledge that sharks play a vital role in maintaining the balance of life in the oceans.

The chain of marine life depends on healthy shark populations. To picture that far too many shark species are in rapid decline, some of them already facing extinction – so some gourmets in China and other Asian countries can savor a bowl of shark fin soup every now and then is just mind boggling!!

You would think that in view of such a catastrophic scenario it should be easy to simply ban shark fishing to save the sharks from being massacred for the least nutritious of their body parts. Well, it is not: You have the fishing industry lobbyists, you have the mighty shark fin mafia, not much less criminal than the drug cartels, you have the politicians who feel that they have to be responsive to

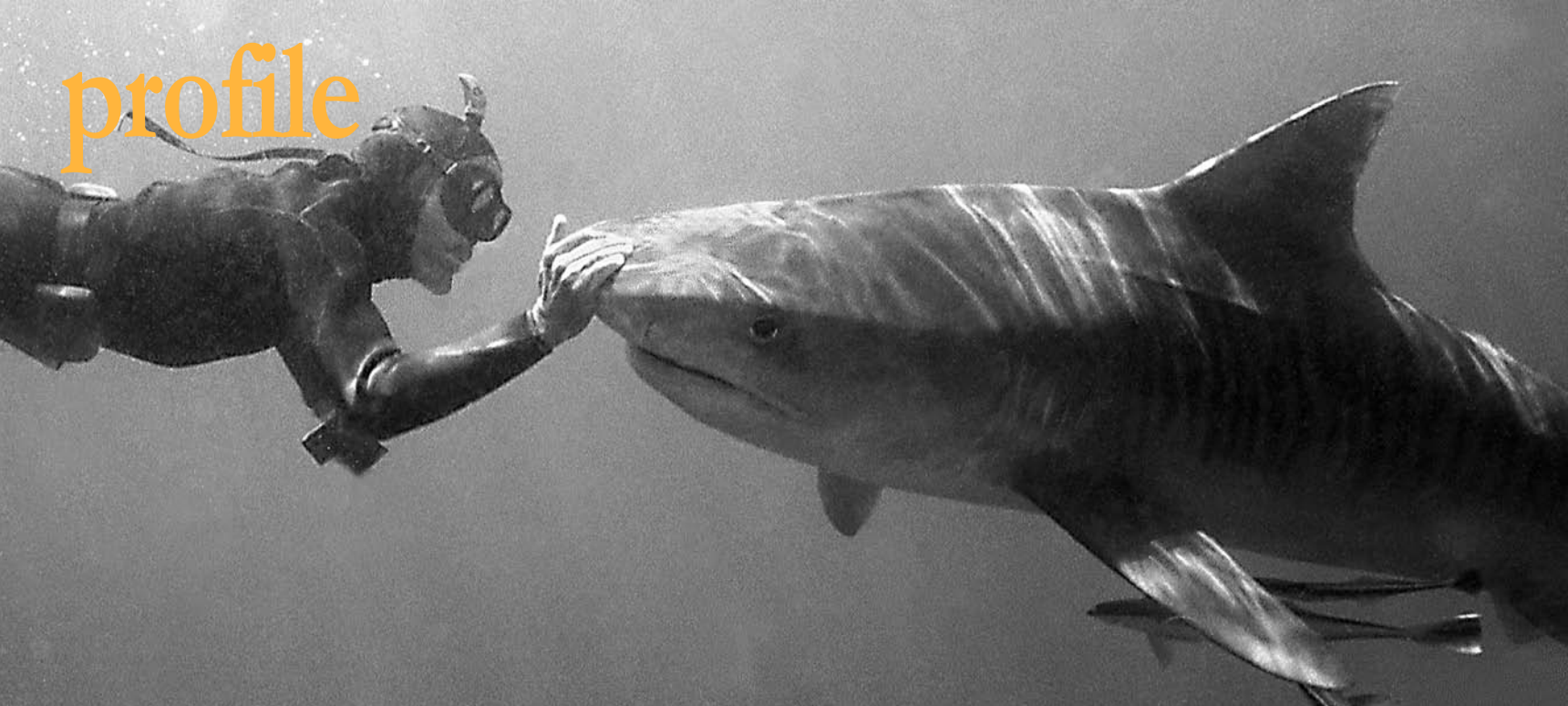
their constituencies, among them big business and conservationists; and you have a lot of corruption, mainly in the poorer maritime countries.

AW: Talking about non-profit conservation groups – what about them? Are they powerful enough to bring about the desired changes in shark protection?

WL: Unfortunately, some of these non-governmental organizations have become quite "political", as it were. I will restrain myself from getting too specific, but what I could see during the last years has been somewhat sobering, to put it mildly. With some exceptions, the shark conservation community,

if I could call it a 'community', has degraded itself to some sort of a "vanity fair". As my son Felix put it recently, photographers, videographers, scientists, non-profits, activists, and the hundreds of online groups that have sprung up are often driven by rather egotistical motives. There is, according to Felix, a lack of togetherness because too many individuals want credit – they want credit for bringing the media's attention to something, changing a law, getting a grant, and so forth.

Many people have their own agendas and are just using the sharks and their misfortune as an opportunity to springboard themselves to "fame". I believe



of shark fin soup amounts to preserving cultural values which is an absolutely ludicrous contention that shouldn't be even discussed.

AW: One last question - which is your preferred shark dive spot?

WL: Definitely Tiger Beach in the Bahamas! This is a place where diving conditions are absolutely ideal: Stunning visibility, plenty of sharks, docile and friendly lemon sharks, and,

of course, the truly impressive tiger sharks, forceful, elegant, extremely gentle - all in rather shallow water. The sandy bottom which is a perfect backdrop for stunning images and video sequences makes artificial lights, even flashlights, almost superfluous, such is the incredible illumination that is the trade-mark of that place. I have been diving there at least once a year since March 2007 - and will keep going back, no question about it.

In fact, you will find me at Tiger Beach during the first two weeks of November, on-board the Dolphin Dream. I believe the travel arranger, Dominique Macan of DiveAdvice, has still two or three open spots. If your readers want to check the availability, and dive with tiger sharks and some very cool people from many different countries, here is the link: http://www.diveadvice.com/Tiger_Shark_Diving.htm

Felix is right. I have once asked an internationally well-known videographer and author why he got interested in sharks. His answer was as telling as it was disarmingly honest: "Because sharks sell". I have seen him diving with sharks, and could see from the way he interacted with them that he had no feeling whatsoever for them. If everyone's agenda was to save sharks, sharks would be safer today.

To be fair, there are very efficient and professional shark conservation groups that work behind the scenes as inconspicuously as possible with remarkable results. The Bahamas have recently enacted a total ban on shark fishing. Two conservation organizations, one local, the other international, were instrumental in working actively with members of the Bahamian government for their parliament to declare the archipelago a shark sanctuary. The fact that other maritime nations have also moved decisively to protect their sharks shows that the work of shark conservation groups which were

behind these initiatives can be highly effective in bringing about the changes that are essential for the survival and preservation of sharks.

AW: You have been involved with many campaigns against shark finning and protection again sharks. In these years we see how more and more states are banning shark fin products and practices, and traders too. I presume one of the more spectacular victories must have been when the giant chinese owned trading portal alibaba.com finally succumbed to the pressure and forbade shark fin products on their portal.

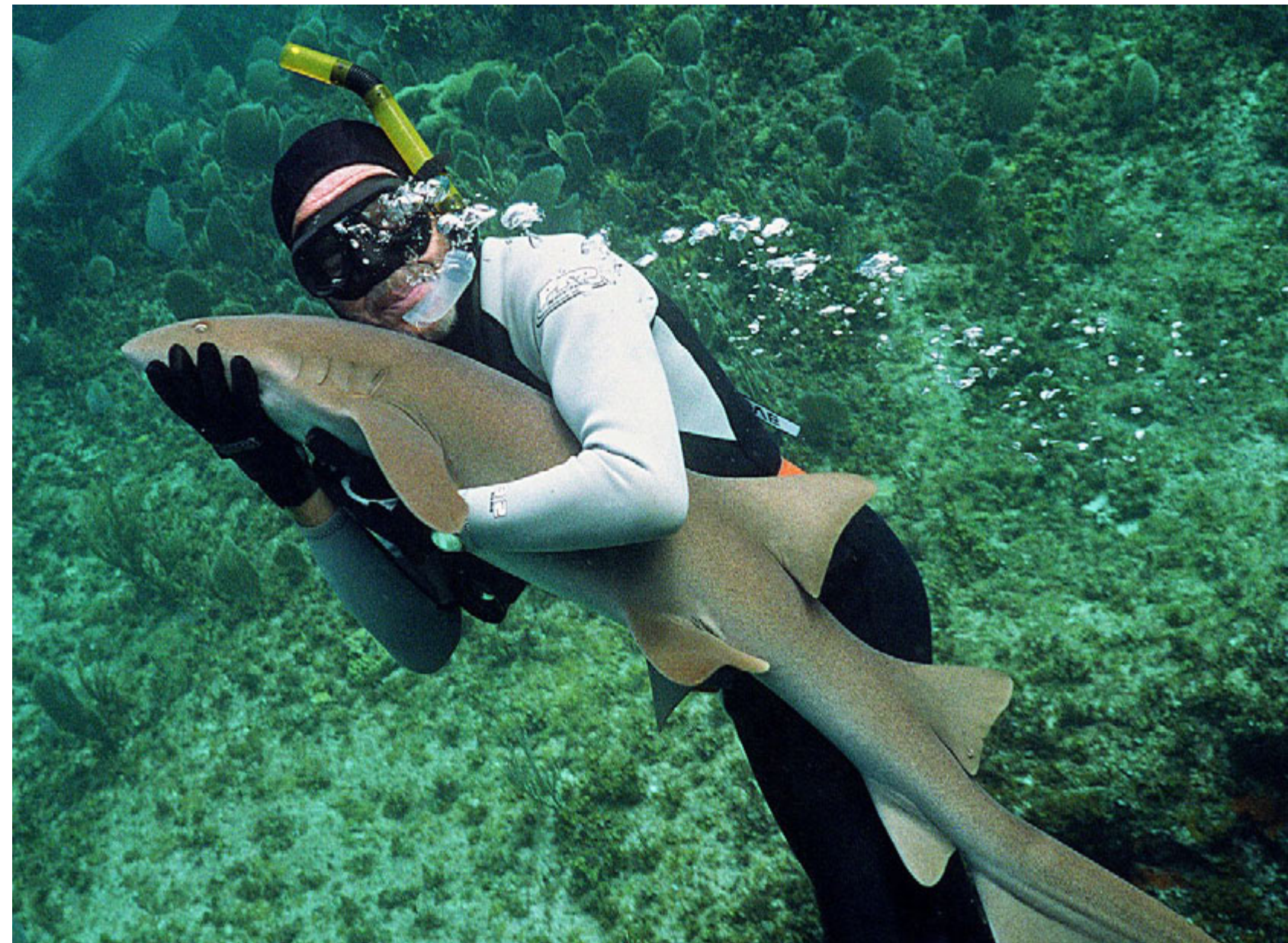
What do you consider the biggest victory and what is the biggest challenge lying ahead?

WL: You know, positive outcomes in shark conservation, victories as you call them, are always a result of team work and cooperation. If you have committed people trying to make a difference, and if they are ready to leave personal agendas behind, putting the sharks first instead of self-

promotion, as I said rather common tendencies in the shark conservation "business" as I call it, I cannot think of "a" biggest victory. I see many.

You mentioned that there is an ever growing number of countries that now fully protect their sharks. That is extremely encouraging as I believe it will have a contagious effect all over the globe. The biggest challenges lying ahead are to achieve an international agreement to extend the protection of sharks beyond the territorial boundaries of the maritime nations, and to further enlighten the people about the important role of robust shark populations in maintaining the oceans healthy.

In my view, one of the most urgent goals is to bring the educated Chinese into the conservation boat. Some conservation groups are already working on it, quite successfully as I understand. I am absolutely sure that the younger generation in China will eventually be on our side, and will challenge those reactionary traditionalists that maintain that the consumption





20 years on...
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—A Personal View

Deep D(r)iving Motivations

Text by Wes Skiles

Every time I think of deep diving, both good and bad memories surface together in my mind. I can recall those exciting evenings over 15 years ago when my friends and I would drive from Jacksonville to Eagle's Nest just for an evening dive. We were full of anticipation back then for the promise each dive held. Among other things, these dives offered the challenge of testing ourselves against narcosis, which we viewed as an obstacle to be overcome, so that we could be "good deep divers". Mastering the depths was extremely satisfying to my ego.

I must admit that I enjoyed the sensation of narcosis, but the real reason I was there was to develop my skill as a deep diver. For some unknown reason, I just had to be able to say that I had been

deep on air. I only wish that I could have known back then the scenarios that were rushing full speed towards me and the consequences of my misdirected actions.

One of the most common reasons people experiment with deep diving is to see how they handle narcosis. Invariably, they share these experiences with their diving peers, but more often than not they hold some of the truth back about how they reacted to the depth; either they do not want to admit that they experienced any level of narcosis, or they want to give the impression that they "overcame it" and "kept it under control".

I am sure that there are a few divers that can be completely honest and objective about their experiences. But most of us would have to admit that we have been a little more *narced* than we were willing to let on to our companions at the time. This situation is not helped any by the existence of those anomalous divers who seem to have total immunity to the effects of narcosis. Unfortunately, these unusual individuals—along with others who simply deny feeling any effects—set the standard for the mass of divers interested in quantifying their capacity to dive deep.

It was hard to admit at the time, but my first face-slammung experience with narcosis occurred at just 160ft. I was crushed—demoralized. I knew that experience and repetition would help get me deeper, but how was I to get that experience if I admitted to anyone that I got narced at 160ft? Eventually, after about 20 dives, I had worked my way well past 200ft. I was finally the victor; I had beaten narcosis—or so I thought.

At this point, let me pose the same questions I ultimately had to ask myself: What is the point? Why would you want to go that deep on air? What purpose is served beyond the excitement of the moment? To my mind, if you don't have a really solid justification and you are doing it for the challenge alone, then it becomes just another cheap thrill. Only not so cheap.

Deep diving on air

Deep diving on air must be approached with a strong sense of the possibilities of uncontrollable circumstances and negative outcomes. Our dive plan that day was to descend to a depth of 165ft, and then to explore a virgin cave passage downstream. The depth and distance we would both be travelling downstream with the current before turning

the dive and exiting against the current were accounted for by our use of a conservative 1/5-air rule, that is, we would begin our return when we had used 1/5 of our air supply. This dive would require an additional stage bottle, as well as oxygen for decompression.

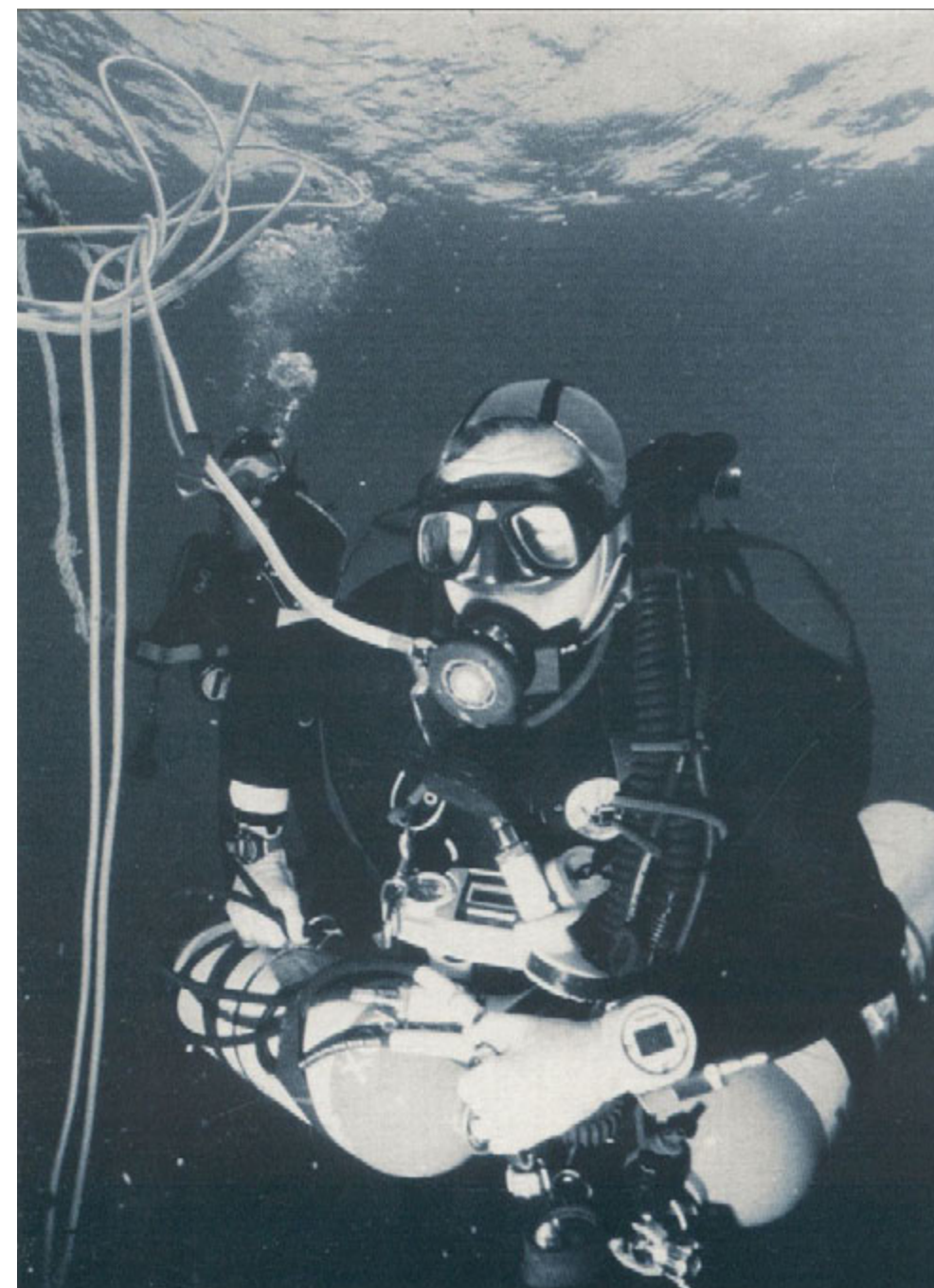
Certified cave divers, we descended on our adventure.

The dive proceeded as planned, with the new passage being explored and survey data collected. When the allotted air was consumed, we began our return trip, having spent considerable time already at the 170-ft level. We gave each other the double-time signal, which meant we would pick up the pace during our exit. Retrieving stage bottles on the way, we prepared for our final exit from the cave.

Seconds later my partner signaled me, indicating that he felt so-so. Although

I did not comprehend the scope of his problem, I realized that we had better slow down. Then, swimming only a few feet further, I turned to see my friend losing consciousness. My mind raced, with heartbeat and breathing following, as the full impact of the situation hit me. Fortunately, he was still breathing and not yet fully blacked out, but there was no way he was going to be able to get out on his own.

Grabbing him by the arm and pulling him over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes, I began a desperate swim for the exit. Less than a hundred feet later, my





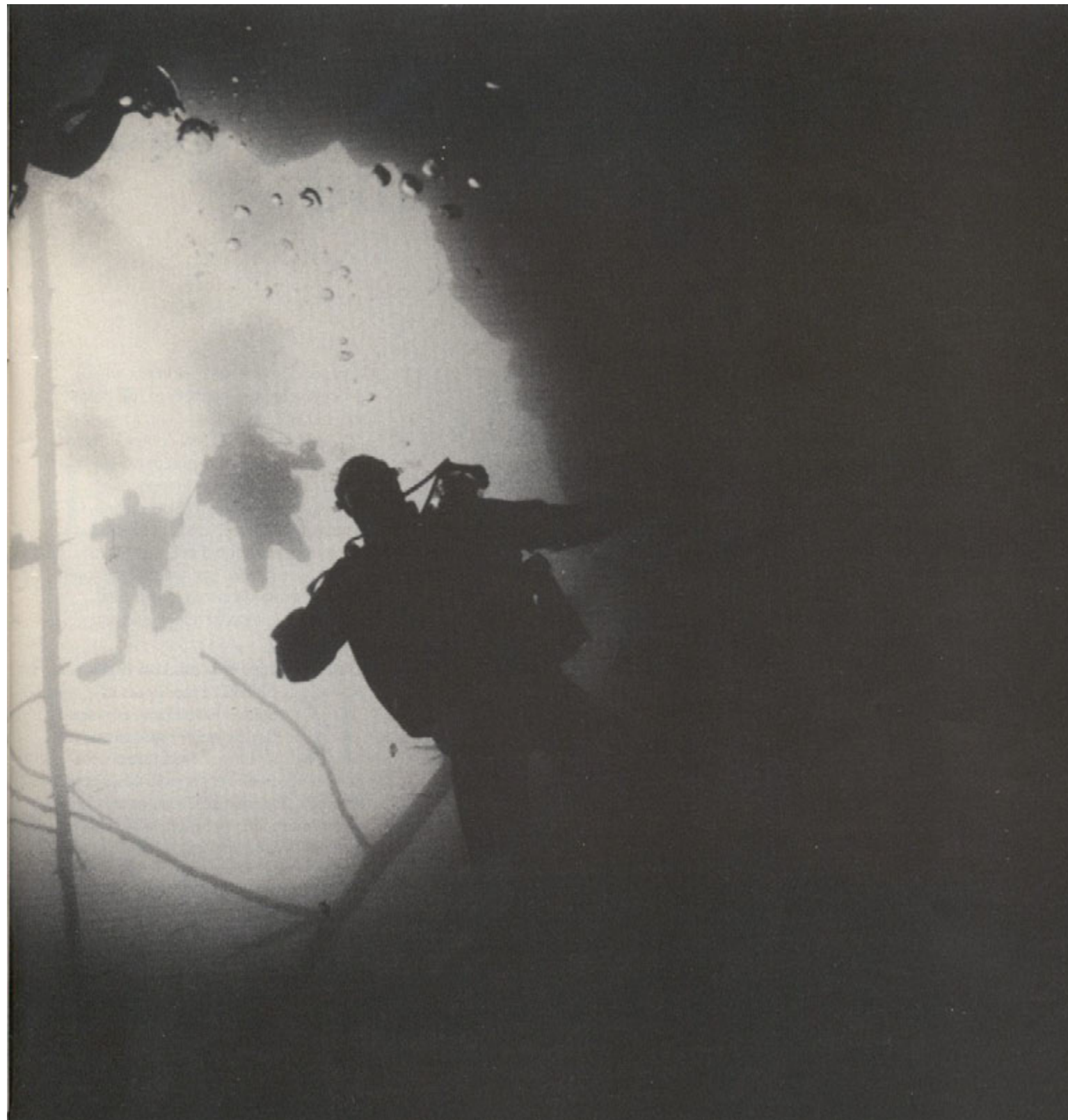
body began to succumb to the stress, my brain pounding like tribal death drums. I clearly remember a flash of regrets—not the kind people supposedly have before they die, but much more pragmatic thoughts. Why didn't I realize that this could have happened? Why was doing this dive so important?

By the time I got to deals and promises with God (I will never do this again, really...) I regained control of my runaway breathing. Reorganizing my thoughts, I got underway at a pace I hoped would keep us both alive. It was still a touch-and-go exit, but both of us survived.

What went wrong

An analysis of our situation pointed to a combination of CO₂ buildup and narcosis—a very real problem that is often ignored by air-breathing deep divers. Our own level of difficulty with this problem could only have been amplified at a greater depth. I ask the air-breathing, deep-diving readers if they are confident of their own abilities to handle a sudden injection of mental and physical stress at depth. If the answer is a smug “yes,” how do you know that?

Instead of modifying my dive habits after this incident, I continued to deep dive. Having been the “victor” of that round—at least in my mind—my response was to change buddies and stick with the “challenge” of deep diving. I was in control. An upcoming scenario



featuring me as the victim was unthinkable.

Deep diving ego syndrome

These experiences played out in the late '70s, when many large, deep cave systems still remained virtually unexplored. I believe my

personal motivation at the time was simply to explore deep caves. In retrospect, exploration imperatives were probably only 20 percent of that motivation; I will now admit that the other 80 percent was what I call “deep diving ego syndrome”.

It was on one of my deepest dives, as part of a three-person team exploring a deep tunnel, that things caught up with me. On two previous dives here I had led the team, so on this third dive I was to be along “for the ride”. Relaxed, confident and without

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the responsibilities of leading, I was unconsciously lowering my guard.

The descent and dive went smoothly with the exception of a couple of minor communication glitches. I was surprised at how far we were getting, and that my buddies had not yet hit their air turn-around point. I called the dive on air and gave the thumbs-up, confident that the others would be ready to turn also. That is when the horror of a narcosis-clogged challenged whatever senses I had left.

As I turned to begin our exit out, the others flashed me with their lights, the beam sweeps an imparting sense of urgency. Spinning about in response to a possible emergency, I now faced my buddies who were signaling emphatically that the surface was in the direction we had been swimming. This meant that either I

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Deep Diving

it? Or were my trusted buddies mentally blind with narcosis? This 50/50, coin-toss moment of decision nearly caused me to pass out from the rapid dump of adrenaline entering my system. But it was two against one. Being not sure but shaken, I decided to give in. Either they would lead us to our doom or to dinner. I simply followed them, not at all sure of who knew what.

The gravity of that error ended my misdirected, ego-driven deep dives

had gotten confused or the both of them had.

Had we turned the dive and begun the exit without my noticing

on compressed air, which, up until that time, had seemed so very important. From that experience, along with a few other not-quite-

so-close calls, I began to reassess the reasons that others and I had used to justify a deep dive on air.

Mixed-gas sport diving

Many years have passed since my "air-powered" deep-diving days. Now my friends will tell you that I am reluctant to dive below 130ft without the benefit of a gas mix. I have come to feel that there is nothing down deep worth visiting while on air. It is just not worth the risk, especially with the advent of mixed-gas sport diving techniques, equipment and table, and with one-atmosphere suits on the horizon.

A wise old diver once told me, "If you stick around long enough, you will see the whole show repeat itself time and time again." I have been around long enough now to agree with him, having seen the loss of a few divers—some really good ones among them—as the show gets replayed.

Deep diving on air never offers a guaranteed safe return, no matter what your reason and confidence tell you. I constantly hear people say, "Boy, that person is a real good deep diver." I now know there is no such thing as getting "good" at deep diving on air. While a person may be truly competent, trusted and liked, their competency will only allow them to be lucky when diving deep. ■

Veteran explorer, filmmaker and photographer Wes Skiles died during a working dive for National Geographic in 2010.

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