



I don't have the best luck with animals. I've been on a million safaris, and I've never seen a goddamn leopard. My closest and least enjoyable experience with very large creatures came in Nepal when a rhinoceros chased me up a tree. Sometimes I think I'm better off going to the zoo.

So when I had the chance to join the tour company Shark Diver on a six-day trip to Mexico's Isla Guadalupe to cage dive with great white sharks, I approached it with measured excitement. One hundred and eighty miles southwest of Ensenada in Baja California, Guadalupe is the best place in the northern hemisphere to see the world's most ferocious predators. Between August and December they show up in droves—more than 100, scientists say—to feed on a blubbery medley of seals and sea lions. Because divers here are almost guaranteed a chance to swim in proximity to them, Guadalupe has become a haunt of dive boats in recent years. It's also the latest political battleground on which the fight for the future of this threatened fish is being waged.

After a bumpy 20-hour crossing on the 87-foot *Islander*, we drop anchor in the shadow of Guadalupe, a 22-mile-long extinct volcano that rises from the Pacific, austere and foreboding like the animals that patrol its waters. The crew swings a pair of 10-foot-tall aluminum cages into the water with a crane and throws tuna heads off the stern to attract the sharks. Our Australian marine-biologist guide, Luke Tipple, delivers a lengthy safety briefing that ultimately comes down to one simple piece of advice: Keep your body parts inside the cage. It all seems too easy considering I'm about to go eyeball to eyeball with a 2,500-pound swimming chain saw.

I pull on a wet suit, shove an air hose connected to the boat's compressor into my mouth and join three other divers in the cage hanging off the stern. Less than an hour after we drop anchor, the first dorsal fin appears. In the clear brine, the fish comes into focus quietly and quickly—a 15-footer nearly as wide as I am tall. Without my realizing it, my hands instantly curl into tightly locked fists. This particular shark, I'm later told, has been named Shredder by the dive operators. He has a deep white gash, the result of a recent conflict, running above his gills, and the tip of his dorsal fin is in tatters. Yet his name comes not from his battle wounds but from the fact that several seasons back he severed a boat's anchor cable with his teeth. Not surprising behavior from an animal that never quite closes its mouth.

Now joined by two even larger females, Shredder goes for the bait. The practice here is to entice the sharks, not feed them, so when Shredder feigns interest, a deckhand pulls the tuna heads away. It's unclear who is toying with whom. As he approaches the tuna heads, the shark opens his mouth. It seems wide enough to park a Smart Car inside. Rows of teeth stack up like assembly-line dentures, the back ones

waiting to move forward when the front ones fall out. His slow glide is 11 million years in the making, the nonchalance of a perfect Darwinian killing machine.

The large population of Guadalupe great whites first lured dive operators here nine years ago. The island is now the centerpiece of a \$3 million-and-growing cage-diving industry. Last year, however, the Mexican government accused dive companies of unethical behavior after a YouTube video showed a great white smashing through the bars of one tour operator's cage with two divers inside. Neither the divers nor the shark was injured, but the incident prompted the Mexican navy to enforce a chumming ban to protect the animals as well as the small local band of abalone divers who claim the sharks have become more aggressive as a result of the chumming. The video collected more than a million online hits and made international news in December, with headlines in the U.S., the U.K. and Australia. NBC's *Today* show ran two segments on it.

Dive operators see the issue differently. Without chumming, they claim, they won't be able to attract the sharks, and if the boats leave no one will be watching the animals, which will be left vulnerable to the poachers who fish sharks for their valuable jaws and fins. "Each

one of those sharks is worth \$20,000 to \$30,000 on the black market," says Marine Conservation Science Institute president Michael Domeier. Adds Patric Douglas, who owns Shark Diver and is my host in Guadalupe, "I have pictures of white-shark meat on sale in the Ensenada fish market." Douglas now runs his outfit with the help of Mexican researchers, who allow him to drop hang bait under their scientific permit.

As I float in Crayola-blue 65-degree water, Shredder

and the other great whites turn loops around my cage. Little about these animals' appearance suggests they need protection from anything. Weighing in at more than a ton, Shredder is a massive wall of flesh. But he's also profoundly beautiful. Thick rods, lateral lines of tissue that help him sense vibration, run down his flanks, creating the kind of streamlined perfection automakers strive to duplicate. His two-toned coloring is masterful camouflage but by no means symmetrical; gray spots fleck the white and vice versa, as if someone had run out of spray paint halfway through the job.

Mere inches away, this infamous sea monster seems almost docile. He's close enough that I could reach out and touch him. You can't do that in a zoo.

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