

the shark hunters

Shark fishermen are emptying our oceans of nature's most perfect predator. Are they greedy, sadistic killers, or just desperate people doing all they can to feed their families? Aaron Gekoski heads into rural Mozambique to live with the shark hunters.

PHOTOGRAPHS AARON GEKOSKI

The silent scream: one of Mozambique's shark fishermen offloads a dead bull shark.



THEY ARE EVIL, DANGEROUS MONSTERS WHO STALK THEIR PREY WITH A SAVAGE EFFICIENCY. THEY ARE RUTHLESS KILLING MACHINES, DEVOID OF EMOTION. I BELIEVE WE'VE HEARD THIS BEFORE? HOWEVER THIS TIME I'M NOT REFERRING TO SHARKS, BUT TO THEIR PREDATORS, THE SHARK FISHERMEN.

How the tides have turned. The shark has been catapulted from villain to victim. The world's media – partly responsible for the shark's miserable reputation – is finally taking an interest in protecting them. Perhaps these toothy predators aren't as bad as we have made them out to be? Even celebrities are doing their part – Alec Baldwin and other Hollywood A-listers are supporting anti-finning campaigns, chef Gordon Ramsey's documentary *Shark Bait* drew in a worldwide audience, and Director Ang Lee shot an anti-finning commercial. The shark conservation movement is definitely gaining momentum.

And much like in Hollywood movies, we need a scapegoat. Our choices are limited to the end consumer (the Chinese), the supplier (the fishermen), or both. I for one have screamed blue murder about both. I rant on incessantly and pathologically about the Chinese and their appalling animal cruelty record. I even tried shark fin soup to see what the fuss was about. It tastes as nice as it sounds: a bowl of chicken broth full of cartilaginous needles plucked from a dried shark fin.

In the past I have been guilty of remonstrating with shark fishermen as they hauled dead sharks onto the beach and cut their fins off. 'Do you know what is happening to these species?' I'd protest and storm off, racking my brain for a solution to this global crisis.

Yet as a filmmaker, I have also learnt that there are two sides to every story. Last year, Dave Charley, Chris Scarffe and I filmed the documentary *Shiver* (which you may have read about in the summer issue of *Divesite*). Following local hero Carlos Macuacua, we explored Mozambique's beautiful 3 000-kilometre coastline to investigate what was happening to the sharks there. It was the first time these issues had been made public to Mozambicans. The documentary was screened on national TV, part of a campaign instigated by Dave against this cruel trade.

We spent a lot of time in remote areas, coming across shark finning camps. It was there we met the shark hunters. During this time we got to know people far removed from their fearsome reputation, much like the sharks they were catching. We met people of real beauty – gentle, kind and thoughtful souls doing what they needed to survive.

Our encounters were often short and superficial, but we wanted to know a little more, get a little closer. We wanted to be accepted into their communities, experience their lives and find out why they targeted sharks, what they knew about them

and the sustainability of their hunting. We wanted to share our knowledge of the fragility of marine ecosystems and the dangers of eating poisonous shark meat. There was only one option – we had to go and live with the shark hunters.

We planned to film the trip and use the footage to form a pitch for shooting an international version of *Shiver*, a film that would throw us deep into the dark world of shark finning.

Our presenter for *Shiver* will be Dave Charley, producer of the Mozambican version and long term shark conservationist. Dave is one of those rare types that women want to date and men want to be – funny, handsome and most importantly, good to the core.

Dave has lived in Mozambique for the past seven years, first working as a dive instructor before establishing Mozambique's first underwater film company Sangué Bom, meaning 'good blood'. Since then he has been making films on the animals he loves. During this period he has formed close ties with the fishermen up and down this coast. He even has a decent grasp of the local dialect Bitonga. He casts no judgement, never patronises and addresses each person with the respect and dignity they deserve. It helps that Dave is fluent in Portuguese, which he learnt whilst volunteering for a mission in one of Rio de Janeiro's most dangerous slums. Dave has spent his life enhancing and enriching the lives of those around him.

The shark hunters live deep in a remote part of Inhambane Province, inaccessible to anything other than a 4x4. We were met by Joaquim, the boss of all of the fishing operations there. Joaquim is in his mid-40s yet has the body of a 20-year-old, sculpted through years of hard work and fishing. He embraced us like old friends and took us to meet his children and both of his wives. Joaquim seemed very pleased with the fact he had two wives. 'Twice the fun', he winked.

Joaquim showed us to his small plot of pristine land in amongst the bush and palm trees. It was beautiful and just a minute from the beach – we had been thrown back to a land lost in time. Three small reed huts housed him, his wives and his four children. The children frolicked happily outside the huts, intrigued by the sweaty group of white people who had just shown up to live with them. Feisty, vocal chickens and their loyal gaggle of chirpy chicks pecked away at the sand and each other. 'You can pitch your tent there,' said Joaquim as he pointed to a space right next to the chicken coup. We erected the tent and prepared ourselves for a very early wake up call.



Shark fisherman Antonio examines his day's catch.

Antonio and the rest of the fishermen take a breather after rowing the sharks back to shore.



A bull shark is dragged across the beach by members of the community before having its fins removed. The meat is then eaten or sold at local markets.



low two to three per day now. This was clear evidence of an unsustainable practice. The fishermen knew their children might not have the option to catch sharks in the future. They knew that something needed to be done urgently. Joaquim's plan was to cease longlining in the coming weeks, for a six-month period, to allow populations to replenish.

It was heartening to hear that the fishermen were aware of the global shark crisis and protecting them was a concern. In effect, they would be making themselves unemployed in the name of conservation. In reality though, six months of no fishing would have very little impact on shark populations. Dave explained to the fishermen that it takes some of the local shark species 15 to 20 years to reach sexual maturity and that they give birth to very few young over their lifetime. To notice any real difference they would need to stop fishing for 10,

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We bought some fish, which was prepared by Joaquim's first wife Madeleine. This family, like many others we had encountered in these communities, had clear gender divisions – the men provided, the women nurtured. We spent some time talking to Joaquim over dinner and were joined by two other shark hunters, Luis, a kindly, soft-spoken man, and Nelson, a 6'8" giant who smiled and laughed more than the average man. Not quite the sadistic killers shark fishermen are made out to be.

Joaquim spoke of his life as a fisherman over the past 40 years. His community only started targeting sharks 10 years ago when the Chinese came and supplied them with boats and longlines. The Chinese said they wanted the fins to be removed from the sharks, dried and then sent on to a middleman. They didn't want the shark meat, or to have to explain their motives, they just wanted the fishermen to be rewarded handsomely for their efforts. Now, a kilogram of dried guitarfish fins, so prized for shark fin soup, makes the fishermen more money than two months of working at one of the two lodges in the area. 'We don't actually want to catch sharks, it's not in our culture. But we have limited ways of supporting our families. There are very few jobs here. If I can make in one day what I would in one month, then what choice do I have? I have four children – they need to eat,' Joaquim explained.

Joaquim and the rest of the shark hunters were aware that many shark species were facing extinction. They also had a limited grasp of the consequences their fishing was having on marine ecosystems. They knew that within years there would be no sharks left here at all. Catch rates had already decreased here from 15 to 20 sharks per day 10 years ago, to a worryingly

15, 20 years. 'It was great to hear that the fishermen wanted to conserve these species. It's just a shame there isn't more education, legislation and enforcement in order to manage the fishing here,' Dave told us later.

Sadly, the fishermen's efforts may be futile. Joaquim told us that earlier this year he caught a shark with only its tail fin remaining. Miraculously, it had survived being finned only to be caught again and killed. This tragic story was clear evidence of industrial fishing going on in these waters, operating as nameless, faceless vessels, leaving waste and destruction in their wake. With only one patrol vessel to control fishing activities along its coastline, rural Mozambicans are helpless to combat the illegal fishing activities. Night after night they see boats coming inshore, removing vast quantities of fish and disappearing before sunrise. They see no benefit from this, and are left with depleted fish stocks to survive on. Two years ago, rotting corpses of finned sharks washed up on their beaches as a result of industrial finning.

Joaquim had watched the Mozambican version of *Shiver* which contained evidence of the dangers of eating shark meat. After a previous trip to a shark camp, we had sent some meat samples to be tested for the toxin Methylmercury, which, if consumed in large doses, is particularly harmful to pregnant women and children. 'I now know that shark meat contains poison, but along

ABOVE Joaquim and man-mountain Nelson row out to their buoys, with Dave in tow. Day after day they made this tiring journey and came away with nothing..



We reached the buoys and swam down on the lines. Nothing. No sharks, not even a baby. Nelson assured us that this was unusual, there was always at least one...

with the extra money we make from the fins, we also get a lot of food from one shark, which feeds many people. And there are not so many fish left anyway! We need to target other species.'

It's not only shark numbers that our depleting along this coastline, but all fish stock. The vessels that operate far out at sea with such ruthless efficiency are depriving local people of a vital source of protein and forcing them to target species it is not in their culture to catch. Although they are poisoning themselves, they have to continue. They have no choice. We slumped off to bed sober, despite the lashings of local rum in our bellies.

We rose with the sun – and chickens – at 4.45am. We left with Nelson and Joaquim and headed to their small wooden rowing boats. Propped up on the boats were their oars, which the fishermen had imaginatively constructed by attaching the plastic from disused water tanks to wooden poles. It blew us away that they would row for kilometres every day in these boats, with these tools – often through dangerous shore breaks. It's little wonder Joaquim was in such good shape. As the hunters rowed out to their tethered buoys, we followed in our boat, along with dive equipment and cameras to capture footage of any sharks on the lines. As a marine filmmaker, these situations always leave you with mixed emotions. You hate to see an animal hooked and suffering on a line. And it breaks your heart to watch as they are hauled up, battered with a stick and left to die. Yet sometimes you need disturbing footage to shock people into action: dramatic images of one dying shark may be enough to turn many people into shark conservationists.

We reached the buoys and swam down on the lines. Nothing. No sharks, not even a baby. Nelson assured us that this was unusual, there was always at least one. We were disappointed, but had more days ahead of us. We headed back to the camp, where the relentless Madeleine was toiling away in the midday sun to provide us a lunch of fish and rice, which we gratefully gobbled down – it had been a hard morning's work. Thank goodness we weren't the ones rowing a small wooden boat, propelled by oars made from barrels. Somehow, Nelson and Joaquim looked fresh as daisies.

Over the next few days we continued with the same routine. We got clucked up at sunrise, went out with the shark hunters all morning, dived on the lines in the hope of seeing sharks, caught nothing, came home, and ate fish and rice for lunch (and dinner). The heat and humidity was stifling, making lugging around

heavy equipment and filming on a boat all morning shattering work. And this wasn't even close to what the fishermen endured day in, day out. When we weren't resting, we would play tag or hide-and-seek with the children. It appalled us that these perfect pictures of innocence were poisoning themselves on an almost daily basis by eating toxic meat.

The family were curious about our interest in sharks. We told them about their appeal to divers, the bad reputation they have suffered from, and how the shark conservation movement is finally beginning to grow. They seemed interested, if a little bemused, that people paid unimaginable sums of money to sink under the waves and get eyeball to eyeball with the fishermen's prey. When we weren't with the family, we spent time at the one watering hole – Jose's bar – meeting locals, laughing hard, hearing fascinating tales of fishing, practicing our Bitonga and getting drunk on rum. There was very little else to do.

We spoke in depth to the shark hunters, who showed us great warmth and hospitality. They agreed to watch *Shiver* one evening. We bought some petrol for the generator and showed the film to about 30 locals. Afterwards, they spoke candidly to us. They all kept echoing the same sentiments – shark fishing was a dangerous profession that they do because they have to, not because they want to. They told us a story of how, a few years back, some rotten shark guts had been thrown into a local river,

ABOVE A local lady cooks up fish, before selling it on.



poisoning the water supply and killing seven people. As for eating the meat, the fishermen didn't even really like the taste of it. But there was little else for them to eat and few ways to make a living.

The end of the week was approaching and the shark hunters still hadn't caught any sharks. With every morning that passed we got more desperate, as did the fishermen. We needed the footage, and Chris and Dave had to fly to Maputo for another job. We were also covering the substantial cost of hiring a dive boat every day. The fishermen's requirements were more pressing. They needed the money from the fins and the meat to eat. They blamed the passing cyclone, then the time of year. But truth be told, they didn't know where the sharks had gone. Eventually we had to make a choice: cut our losses, or stay just one more day. We stayed and got lucky. A documentary pitch wouldn't be a documentary pitch without this sort of last-minute drama.

We had been filming another group of shark hunters who worked further down the beach, in the hope this would double our chances of getting a shark. It worked – they caught a large dusky and bull shark. The bull shark, a big but not fully formed male, was still clinging onto life on the line. The crew jumped into the water and started filming.

After great whites, bull sharks arguably have the fiercest reputation of any shark. Stocky of build, their feisty natures are fueled by the highest levels of testosterone of any animal on earth. I'd been lucky enough to swim with bull sharks many times and witness their power, speed and agility first hand. Yet there I was watching one flail limply on a fishing line as its life ebbed away.

Back on the beach, the shark hunters were met by members of the community. After going so long without catching anything, they were elated. The fishermen dumped the sharks over the side of the boat and then dragged them off the beach by their jaws. The sharks seemed to omit silent screams through their gaping, lifeless mouths. They were then taken to have their fins removed under a large palm tree Dave named the 'Death Tree'. It was an ignominious end to a long life, the ocean's finest predator succumbing to the greatest predator to ever walk this earth.

The week had left us aching and exhausted from all the physical work, early mornings, and lack of sleep. We were emotional, sunburnt and hungry. We hadn't seen a shower, toilet, or vegetable all week. But we had got what we came for – dramatic footage of the sharks' and fishermen's struggle for survival. We headed back to Joaquim's to thank him and his family and say goodbye.

During our short period in the shark camp we met honest and hardworking people living in inaccessible regions on arid, infertile land. They rely on the ocean and what's left of its content for sustenance. Whilst it is easy to romanticise their back-to-basics existence, the reality is that their lives are fraught with difficulties and dangers. We headed back to Tofo deeply affected, humbled, and full of respect for these survivors.

Back at home we turned the footage into a short pitch reel which we will use to raise funds to make an international version of *Shiver*. We want to shoot a film that will be the biggest on sharks since *Sharkwater*, a film that will take us into the heart of the shark finning industry from the impoverished finning camps of Mozambique to the mass industrial vessels of the high seas, and finally, to the opulent banqueting tables of China.

Through this film we want to show the world it's not only the sharks that are suffering, but also rural fishing villages who are targeting sharks because they have little choice in the matter. Worldwide, fish stocks are being decimated. Remote fishing communities rely on these once protein-rich waters for their survival. Now, tragically, the meat they are consuming is poisonous.

It is our hope that *Shiver* will show the world what is happening to sharks before there are none left. We hope that the sharks we filmed losing their battle for life didn't die in vain. As wildlife legend George Schaller so eloquently put it, 'Pen and camera are weapons against oblivion, they can raise awareness for that which may soon be lost forever'. ■

➤ You can watch the pitch and see footage from the camp on Aaron Gekoski's website www.aarongekoski.com as well as www.mozimages.com. You can also watch the Mozambican version of *Shiver* on Aaron's website.

ABOVE (from top) Dave examines a dead shark, one of the three that are slaughtered every second around the world; a group of children watch enthralled as *Shiver* is projected onto a sheet in the village. .