



Mokarran

The Great Hammerhead

By Charles Hood

I think it is fair to say that out of all the large sharks the great hammerhead (*Sphyrna mokarran*) is one of the rarest observed by man. Why is this so? Well for a start it is an oceanic shark, that is for most of the time it lives away from the shore and out to sea. Furthermore it is usually a solitary predator and is never seen in schools like the scalloped hammerhead (*Sphyrna lewini*) of the Cocos for instance. So what's the difference between mokarran and the other hammerheads? Essentially with an average length of between 4-6 metres, mokarran is a giant. It is also spiky. Compared with other sharks its huge dorsal fin protrudes upward second only in height to that of an orca's fin. Moreover its tail, pectoral and anal fins stick outwards giving the bizarre appearance of some futuristic flying machine. Quite simply it is an awe inspiring fish.

Rare and unusual sharks attract similar minded people who track them down. At an, 'off the main road' marina north of Fort Lauderdale in Florida lives Jim Abernethy. With his wife Anna he runs Shearwater, a cosy liveaboard with an eccentric skipper called Kirk. Together with a cook they will take you out to a remote location in the North Bahamas. This is great hammerhead territory. It is also home to numerous reef sharks, bull sharks, lemon sharks and tiger sharks. The principle is simple. The boat is anchored in a known spot and dinner is served. It is then simply a waiting game.



Jim Abernethy stirring the chum

It's amazing how all these sharks take so long to turn up given the sheer amount of chum, blood and dead fish put into the water. However, Jim just doesn't give up. From first light to dusk he tends to the bait both on deck and underwater. It is this persistence that eventually pays off. First to arrive were the reef sharks, closely followed by bulls and lemons. When the great

Hammerhead turned up it was unmistakable. All of a sudden one gets the feeling of being alone. The presence of mokarran will almost always scare away other sharks – with the exception of the tiger shark. It invariably swims up current just below the surface towards the stern of an anchored vessel. Here is the best place to position yourself, masked by



Trying to position myself between the shark and the stern didn't always go to plan 250th sec f5.6 at 200 ASA 28mm natural light

the splashing of the transom and generator noise.

The team had done everything to get the shark in the right position now it was up to us to get the image. I chose to use a Nikon D100 in a Sea & Sea housing. I was not too sure on how far the shark would be away from the dome so a 28mm (42mm film equivalent) seemed a safe bet. I

further had two Sea & Sea YS60 strobes just in case I got close enough to capture some highlights. The D100 was set in RAW mode with a 1Gig card this gave me 107 shots per dive. This proved the perfect set up. Even though these sharks are massive they tend to be wary of bubbles and turn away within the last 2 metres.

After the initial adrenalin rush



(Above) a bit close for comfort 180th sec f11 at 200 ASA 28mm twin Sea & Sea YS60 strobes full power on manual

(Top right) mokarran silhouetted against the transom foam. 500th sec f5.6 at 200 ASA 28mm natural light

(Right) Eric Cheng editor of wetpixel.com with mokarran. 180th sec f8 at 200 ASA 28mm natural light

and frantic snapping at every angle I settled into a rhythm. With over 36 shots taken already my film colleagues had to surface and reload; only two of us – both using digital SLRs remained in the water. Jim had a huge grouper head attached to a line and kept the 4 metre female interested. This involved pulling the tethered head toward the stern orientating mokarran face on to us

waiting just below. This was the precise angle I wanted. In RAW mode with the D100 you get four shots before the buffer fills up. This then takes about 20 seconds to clear. With this in mind I waited until she was just about 4 metres away and shot all four frames. This whole procedure was repeated about another half dozen times before the others got back into the water and my tactics changed. I





Taking the bait 180th sec f8 at 200 ASA 28mm twin Sea & Sea YS 60 strobes full power on manual

had previously noticed that the stern crashed relentlessly in the heavy swell. This created a superb backdrop of white water. So I swam away from the stern and positioned myself facing the foam. The only slight problem was the shark would have to pass me so I could capture it in between the boat and me. Although nerve racking I needn't have worried; she was so intent in getting the grouper head nothing in the way grabbed her attention. This continued for about a further half an hour until bang the second image I wanted was in the display on the back of the D100. This

all happened on one dive. Does anyone want to buy my F100?

A further article on Jim's operation appeared in the March 2004 edition of DIVE magazine by DIVE's editor Simon Rogerson.

Also on board was BBC presenter John McIntyre recording the events for a chapter on 'Sharks - the big ten' DVD
www.bigfishtelevision.com

Charles Hood

www.divemagazine.co.uk
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