

Do Great whites think?

By Charles Hood

In 1974 Peter Benchley's novel *Jaws* was first published. The following year a film by the same title sealed Steven Spielberg's talent as a master entertainer. It gripped the world. Great white sharks were the enemy.

What Spielberg managed to achieve was to instil in people's minds that a shark could think. It could actively strategize about what it was going to hunt and serve up on the dinner table. While this may have been highly successful for Hollywood it would prove to be a disaster for *Carcharodon carcharias*.

It is now well documented that sharks just react on their instinct, or do they? Today, the majority of us have changed our minds about the great white. More and more people want to observe this super apex predator in the wild rather than see its extinction. Fishermen who once hunted the great white now take out parties of divers. The saying now is, a great white alive is worth far more than it was once worth dead. Which brings me back to Peter Benchley.

Had he known in the short to medium term the environmental

impact that his novel would create, not a single character would have been struck by his typewriter. However, he can't go back and change history, so today he actively campaigns all over the world to protect the very fish he once made the enemy of all mankind. So keen is he to show everyone what a majestic fish the great white is for his 40th wedding anniversary he took his wife shark diving off Guadalupe Island (Mexico).

The trip was organized by renowned shark photographer Douglas David Seifert and I managed to get myself an invite. However, this was to be no ordinary trip. We were going late in the season (November) to film the large pregnant females. Most snappers go early, around September time, when the water is warmer and the visibility clearer. But this in the main attracts the smaller males. We wanted to photograph the larger females – up to a massive seven metres in length. Now this is where the fun starts.

We were shooting from cages positioned about two metres abaft of the stern. The first problem is you can't orientate yourself for ideal



Mr & Mrs Benchley with Douglas David Seifert



(Above and below) These are the pictures you want. Sea & Sea D100 housing 1/250 f5.6 16mm natural light



This is what you don't want! Sea & Sea D100 housing 1/125 f5.6 20mm

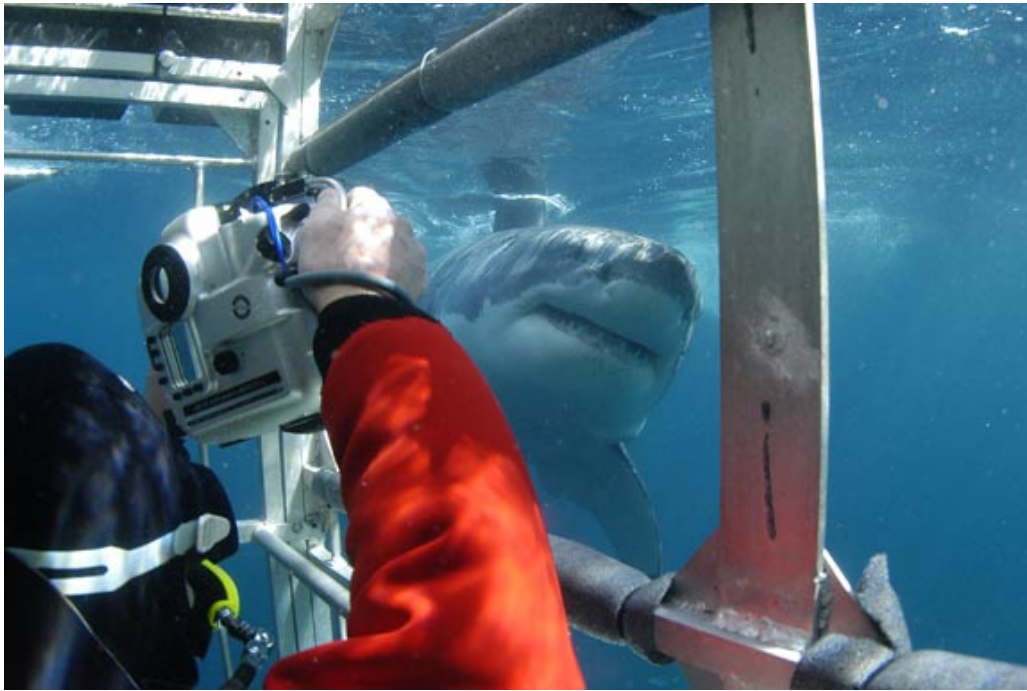
shooting conditions. If the sun was pointing straight at you then so be it. You can't alter the position of the wind and sun. You had to adapt your photography to the situation you were in.

We were using surface supply, which did help in manoeuvrability, but still trying to point a large housing in the confined space of a cage was not at all easy. The first decision that had to be made was a choice of lens. Zooms are great but I find them too soft. I prefer fixed focal length lenses. I would rather sacrifice flexibility in order to get sharper results.

The visibility was around ten

metres at best. So for the majority of the time I used the Nikon 16mm lens on a D100. This proved wide enough, most of the time, (more on that later) to get the whole fish in while not getting the distortion of a full frame fisheye. As we were late in the season the sunlight was relatively weak so I upped the film speed rating to ASA400. Even so this only gave me a shutter speed of around 125th second at f5.6. So for some of the time I used a fill-in flash to just crisp up the edges of the image. This also provided a trickle of light to illuminate the inside of the shark's mouth.

The first four days proved very



Dave Nardini, Seacam and shark. Sea & Sea D100 housing 1/180 f6.7 16mm

frustrating. The females proved to be much more timid than the males. They would hang around about five metres below the surface. In clearer visibility it would have been fine. I could have switched to a 20mm lens and got some credible results. Indeed I did chance a few times but the vis just didn't allow it. But on the fifth and final day this all changed.

All the other boats had disappeared and we were alone. The sharks decided to work the boat as a team. Maybe they are more intelligent that we make them out to be after all. Let me explain shark wrangling.

The concept is to throw large chunks of bait (tuna heads), attached to a rope a few metres in front of the cages. As the sharks approached for the 'kill' the surface crew, known as wranglers, would haul the tuna heads back into the boat and thus lure the sharks towards the cage. Nine times out of ten the shark doesn't get its supper. Apparently the males are happy with this, knowing eventually they will catch the wrangler off guard. However, the females derive a different strategy.

They hunt in pairs. One circles around on the surface while the other



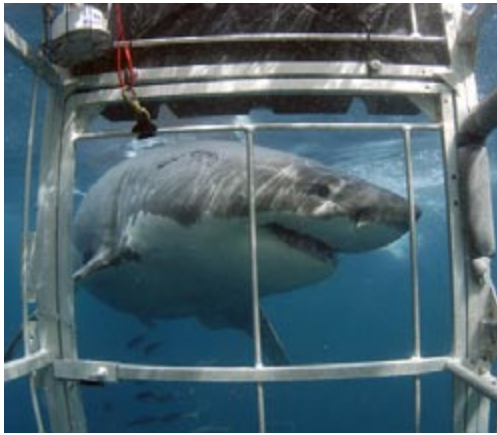
Look into my eye, my eye. Sea & Sea D100 housing 1/125 f6.7 16mm

makes a strike from deep water. This is absolutely terrifying to watch. The first time it happened we were all concentrating on the circling shark. Then bang. We had a six metre two ton hungry fish smash into the cage. This stunned the shark. It also stunned the divers! The problem was not so much the impact as what happened afterwards. Great whites are not renowned for their ability to swim backwards. So we now had this huge animal with its nose jammed into the cage with only forward thrust. The shark did what it only knew how and that was to thrash around not

too dissimilar to a mackerel caught on a line. The only problem was this mackerel was over two tons.

At this point trying to do anything about self-preservation is pointless. It was, however, a great way to test out the D100's auto-focus capability. The 16mm lens allowed me to shoot from the hip and not come away with too disappointing result. Peter explained afterwards that maybe his portrayal of the great white as being intelligent wasn't as far fetched as we are led to believe.

Following this were prepared for the rest of what proved to be a



Can I come in? Sea & Sea D100 housing 1/320 f5.6 16mm natural light

very successful day. There were four of us in the cage. So we worked a system. The guys at the two ends would observe outwards while the two middle guys would split one looking forwards and the other backwards. As the action, when it happened was fast, we developed a series of foot taps to notify each other of an approaching shark and thus could always keep an eye in the view finder. Furthermore if the shark appeared at one end of the cage the front diver would duck down and shoot from the bottom of the cage allowing the second diver in to shoot over his head.

It was evidently apparent that the other cage hadn't gelled as a team and a few cross words were beginning to develop after each dive. So what advice would I give someone going to photograph great whites?

Be flexible and work as a team.

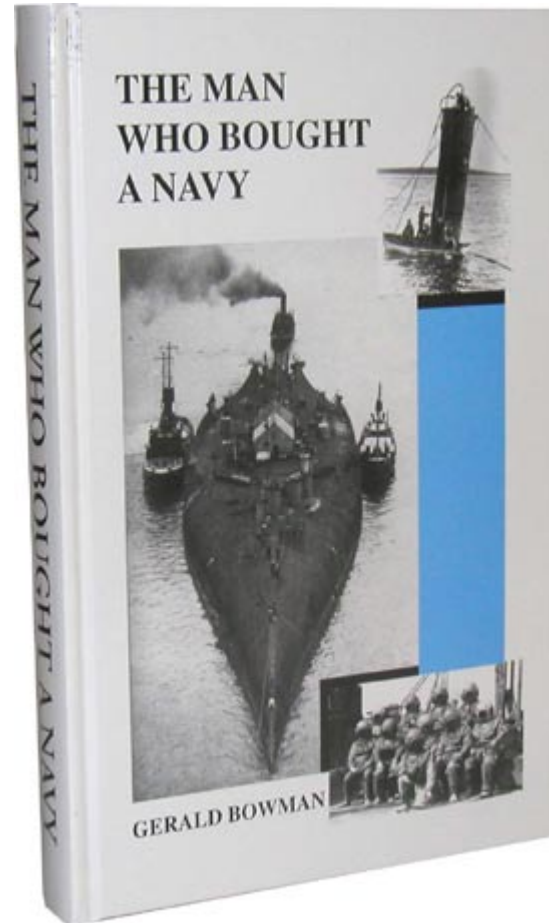
Check out your exposure and shoot in manual. As the sharks are very white they will trick the auto-exposure into under exposing. While this gives a perfect image of a portion of the fish the background will look like it was taken at night. Use autofocus, it works. If it hunts this is because there isn't enough contrast. If there isn't enough contrast chances are the result will be poor anyway. Shutter speed use a minimum of 125th second for a super wide angle lens, a 1/250th is better but watch the synchronisation if you are using a strobe – the D100 sinks at 1/180th second.

Finally it goes without saying – shoot digital. I was convinced that the 20mm would have been a better choice of lens. It was only when you view them on a monitor afterwards I was proved wrong and was able to correct this for the rest of the trip.

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