

Shark Shootout

by Joseph Tepper

As underwater photographers we are often conflicted between choosing subjects that we may find interesting and those which will captivate our audience. You could spend countless hours underwater with a sailfin blenny, only to receive little more than a befuddled look from your landlubber friends, as the perfect shot appears in a montage of your latest trip. Disappointed with the abysmal reaction to the well-earned shot, you find little comfort in the “ooh’s” and “ahh’s” that accompany the next slide; a poorly exposed shot of a small grey reef shark. We might as well face the cold hard truth: in a world where an entire week of television dedicated to these majestic predators permeates the minds of even the most landlocked viewers, that shot of the blenny does not stand a chance. Such is the underwater photographer’s dilemma. As ambassadors between the world below the waves and our own, we must often reluctantly follow the infamous words of a former French queen, and “let the people eat their cake”.

Aboard the Turks and Caicos Aggressor liveaboard, with the ever professional and entertaining crew

of the Jim Church School of Digital Underwater Photography, I had this very opportunity to bring home the allegorical “cake”. Putting my gear together on the first day of diving, I found myself motivated to produce some shark images that would not only impress my friends back home, but even make my fellow underwater photographers green with envy. Needless to say, this is easier said than done. In my (albeit young) diving career, I had never successfully captured an image of a shark with which I was truly satisfied. As divers we understand the reality that, in contrast to the programs featured in “Shark Week”, sharks are often more put off by our foreign presence than we are by them. It is rare to find a shark willing to swim close enough for a good shot, much less a participant to repeat the action.

In a recent article from the January edition of Scuba Diving Magazine, which debated the benefits and consequences of feeding sharks, one expert argued that such action actually encourages further education from divers and non-divers alike. Disregarding individual opinions on the ecological impact



The money shot of the week: while luck certainly plays a role in getting the best pictures, you will find that luck is a matter of practice and preparation. Nikon D300s in Sea and Sea housing with 16 mm lens and dual y110a strobes at full power ISO 200, 1/250th at f9.

of these practices, shark feeding can be quite beneficial to underwater photographers as it provides almost guaranteed shark action and encourages the animals to stick around for photographic adjustments. Although many safe diving operators use chumming to attract the sharks, some have adopted a safer method that does not encourage the animals to relate food with humans. This new strategy consists of a semi-enclosed

metal triangle, whose contents of frozen fish provides the necessary scent to attract the main subjects, while helping to ensure a safe photographic environment for both all parties involved.

Location, location, location. Achieving success at a “shark shootout” often starts with finding the right position in the underwater arena. Being first on the scene is not only the easiest, but also the most



Thanks for an incredible week to the crew of the Turks and Caicos aggressor as well as Mike and Mike from the Jim Church School of Digital Underwater Photography. (Photo courtesy of Mike Mesgleski)

beneficial approach to find the right spot. As soon as the fish is in place, the best location may be near the source of the scent, making sure to exhibit caution in proximity to the shark and the bait. However, as more divers and sharks arrive on scene, your positioning must evolve to avoid unwanted bubbles or backscatter in your shots. You've heard the old adage about being circled by sharks? Well its mostly true; except that in my experience the sharks will follow more of a figure eight pattern to investigate the commotion. By putting yourself at the perimeter of this pattern and facing outwards, you have the opportunity to repeatedly shoot the sharks with a more pleasing negative space and more importantly, some stunning pictures!

Before shooting away, it is important to review some of the unique aspects of metering and lighting sharks. Unlike many underwater subjects, the agile sharks require very high shutter speeds (most likely



In addition to the sunball in the background, I like the composition of this picture because the shark's eye lies almost exactly on an intersection for the rule of thirds. Nikon D300s in Sea and Sea housing with 16 mm lens and dual y110a strobes at full power. ISO 200, 1/200th at f18.

the max flash synch speed) to freeze their action completely. It is good start to set your shutter speed around 250th, varying to meet individual conditions or to experiment with blurring or other artistic effects. As for aperture, it really depends what you're trying to accomplish with the background blue as well as your individual situation (depth, time of day, location, etc). Students in the Jim Church School of Digital Underwater Photography learn quickly that when taking a picture with a strobe you are (in effect) taking two pictures one on top of another. If you are looking to take a shot with just a standard blue background, then you might want to meter for that blue (perhaps shooting for 2/3's of a stop underexposed). In clear Caribbean waters it is a good idea to start in the range of 5.6-8, and then adjust to your personal definition of true blue water.



Black and white can be a nice touch when shooting sharks. Sometimes the best black and white shark shots are the ones that are pre-visualized before converting them in post processing. Nikon D300s in Sea and Sea housing with 16 mm lens and dual y110a strobes at _power. ISO 200, 1/200th at f8.

After finding a background blue that meets your individual taste, while maintaining a shutter speed that stops the shark's action, strobe position is the next major concern. At the start of the trip I began with a standard strobe positioning for traditional wide angle photography: arms extended on each side, with strobes at 10 and 2 o'clock. However, as the week progressed and I allowed the sharks to come closer, I found that moving the strobes to a lower angle (more like 8 and 4) eliminated unwanted shadows underneath the subject. One major challenge of lighting sharks with strobes is finding the right position and settings that will properly light the dark dorsal side without over exposing the white underside. The best way to handle this problem is to keep one strobe over to correctly light the darker features of the back and

face, while moving the second strobe to a lower position to independently eliminate the shadows on the underside.

Once you are comfortable with exposing sharks against a plain background, you might want to spice up your shots with a sunburst or two. Shooting sharks and sun balls can be challenging: the main problem lies in being able to freeze the action of the shark and perfectly expose the sun ball, while sufficiently lighting the shark with your strobes. In order to capture strong sunbursts we need to have a high shutter speed (good thing that sharks require a high shutter speed anyways) and a high f-stop for that ideal spherical shape. Unfortunately, these settings can result in a poorly exposed shark. In order to compensate for the camera's exposure settings you may need to start with your strobes at full power, adjust as needed, and (you guessed it) get closer! Another problem can be finding the proper angle at which to compose a shot with both the sun and the shark. The best time of day for such shots is in the morning and late afternoon when the sun is lowest on the horizon. However, as the sun begins to rise higher into the sky, it is nearly impossible to compose a shot with the shark and sun burst. In environments featuring less favorable lighting conditions it can be helpful to increase the ISO as not to compromise the high shutter speed or aperture needed for the sunburst and shark's speed.

One reason behind the universal allure of shark images, in addition to the iconic image associated with these animals, is the result of one basic rule of photographic composition in action: the human eye is drawn to curves. Because of this, it is vitally important (in most cases) to include as much of the shark in the shot as possible. Capturing the perfect



When using food to attract sharks, you will find that sometimes nurse sharks will sneak into the chaos and try to suck the food out of the container. Such behavior gave me the perfect opportunity for several close up shots of the shark's eyes and denticles. Nikon D300s in Sea and Sea housing with 60 mm lens and dual y110a strobes at half power. ISO 200, 1/125th at f22.

composition of a shark is not always dependent on the photographer's patience. In fact, the best strategy can be to fire off as many shots as possible when the shark enters the range of the strobe (keep in mind that your strobe will take longer to recycle to full power, resulting in only a couple of shots for each shark).

For the most part, a 16mm fisheye or a comparable lens is most effective in shooting wide angle with sharks as it keeps the majority of the shot in sharp focus, while forcing the photographer to get closer to the subject. The increasing popularity of zoom lenses, while useful for shooting more timid subjects, has little utility with sharks that will



Grey Reef Shark

Maybe the result of the boredom of off-gassing rather than artistic inspiration, using photoshop to have the shark pop out of the frame creates a 3D effect. Nikon D300s in Sea and Sea housing with 16 mm lens and dual y110a strobes at 1/3 power. ISO 400, 1/160th at f5.6.

repeatedly be within a few feet. However, wide angle lenses aren't the only way to capture the intensity and rush of a shark encounter. Shooting with traditionally macro or intermediate lenses, such as a 60mm, can be used to capture powerful images of shark profiles. In one profile shot, I turned off my right strobe, side lit with the left, and cranked up the F-stop, creating a very dramatic effect.

Another unique approach, shooting shark silhouettes, allows the photographer to meter for a natural light exposure without worrying about using strobe light. The difficulty of this technique lies in actually finding the correct body position to capture



the underside of the shark with the sun either directly behind or partially masked by the subject (using 45 degree viewfinders is a great advantage). Lying flat on my back in the sand, in my initial attempt to achieve the best possible angle, I quickly realized that this maneuver is as ineffective as it is inelegant. In contrast, standing just off the nearby wall provides the maneuverability needed to incorporate the sun directly behind the subject. Of course, if such a drop-off is not available, you are welcome to try the more awkward and backbreaking positioning previously mentioned.

Of course, as is the case with any underwater



Another busy week for the Jim Church School of Digital Underwater Photography. Organization is key on any dive trip, but without question it is a crucial element for success on a crowded boat. (photo courtesy of Mike Mesgleski)

Who says sharks cant fly? Capturing movement and poise is an important quality to any shot, especially one without close eye contact. Nikon D300s in Sea and Sea housing with 16 mm lens and dual y110a strobes at full power. ISO 200, 1/250th at f14.

subject, a pinch of luck can be equally as important as any other number of factors. My favorite shot of the trip, which features a large Caribbean reef shark and a friendly green moray eel, is a perfect example of such a phenomenon. In this case, there were numerous elements that culminated into the overall effect of the shot: the curved and diagonal composition of the shark, the eel at the bottom, the hook in the shark's mouth, and even the half-sunburst at the top. I would love to say that sitting on the boat before the dive I planned the entire shot, but to say that would be far from the truth. In fact, the real credit for this shot should be given

my buddy who pointed out the eel on the opposite side of the coral, which inspired me to compose the shot as seen in the final image. Putting the shark shooting routine practiced during the trip into effect, I metered the blue, framed the eel and sun, and to waited patiently for the shark to come into frame.

A few weeks later, my family and friends sit motionless through my slide show of the trip, as images of blennies, pipefish, and juvenile spotted drums flash by with little reaction as I expected. The picture of the shark and eel pops up accompanied by a crescendo of "oo's" and "ahh's". However, I am no longer frustrated by this clear incidence of favoritism. For one, I am comforted to know that this picture, captured in only a one hundredth of a second, compensates for many years of practice and failure. For another, if I am ever again disheartened by the lack of appreciation for my beloved macro subjects, I need only remember the moment when my buddy glanced at that photo displayed on my camera's screen during the safety stop. The regulator nearly fell out of his mouth.

Joseph Tepper





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