

Running of the Bulls

with Pete Atkinson

Readers' discretion advised...

Brandon Paige likes fish. The bigger the better. This tall blonde South African ex-spearo has adult bull sharks for friends.

Beqa Lagoon in Fiji used to be famous for soft corals - the "soft coral capital of the world". Yeah, right. Aquatrek's 3D dive site will take your mind off soft corals; for good.

My brain was totally frizzled by a sea full of giant giant (no typo) trevally and seven species of sharks. Well we didn't get the tigers or hammerheads which sometimes turn up.

There's no secret to attracting all these sharks, you could do it in your swimming pool. You just need half a tonne of fish trash. No kidding! Two 240 litre wheelie bins, two dive-masters apiece and some huge tubs of whole bonito and marlin steaks the size of buckets, all chuck-outs from the Fiji Fish processing factory. No wonder there's nothing left in the sea except at Aquatrek 3D.

Brandon appears completely nonchalant about the whole thing, hand-feeding 3 1/2m bull sharks a metre from my camera. It's completely outrageous! Outside great whites, I can't imagine a more exciting shark feed, and of course there's no cage. You can lie behind a low coral wall if you like. And pray.

I had an assignment to photograph the feed, so we were feeding at 32m and doing 25 minutes decompression twice a day. You can train bulls to feed on the surface, but Brandon wanted to avoid this as it makes getting in the water in one piece somewhat tricky. And getting out - forget it.

Even so, arriving at the dive site 4 miles west of Pacific Harbour on Fiji's Coral Coast, a big drum of bonito heads is poured in the water to quieten the excited giant trevally. There's about 150 between 20 and 30kg at a guess. Imagine going for a dip amongst starving piranhas... That's what it looks and sounds like. The guys on their first open water dives change their underpants about now.

So the instructions are pretty clear; don't point at anything on the way down since a trevally is likely to chomp a digit off. You want to pee inside your wetsuit for the same reason if you're a bloke. You'll be hanging on tight to all orifices so it shouldn't be an issue.

Brandon started the feed two and a half years ago on a derelict coral rubble wall on serendipitously named



Brandon Paige hand-feeding a 3m bull shark. 18mm lens. f4, 1/125th Provia F. Nikon F4. 2 SB-24 housed flash guns.

Brandon Paige (on right) with some small offerings to the Gods. Nikon F90. Velvia.



Shark Reef. The trick was to get the local village involved, give them an income from every diver that visits, turn the area into a marine park and hope Wainiyabia village didn't host a Methodist Convention.

On a couple of dives, surrounded by 8 bulls between 2 and 3m long, three big nurse sharks, a lemon, silver tip, and greys, black tips and white tips, suddenly everything went quiet; the bulls withdrew from what Brandon calls "The Arena."

And along the cliff waltz a bunch of divers from Dive Connections at Pacific Harbour. I couldn't believe any operation could be so discourteous. Brandon set the thing up, habituated the animals, got Ron and Val Taylor and Howard and Michelle Hall there (at the same time as tiger sharks) even hired a Pommie stills photographer. And these guys simply gate-crash the party, spoiling the experience for everyone. Brandon has no problem with Dive Connections taking people there, but like any person with an IQ over 3, thinks that the polite thing to do would be to dive there when Aquatrek don't have people in the water. There are still plenty of sharks in an unbaited situation.

Something special is happening here and word has yet to get out. The only other place you can see bull sharks hand-fed is in Cuba, and if you're American you're probably out of luck because Bush needs the Florida vote.

The most lively time to be there is just after the female bull sharks have pupped in the southern Summer and return ravenous. Bulls are interesting sharks. Third in the unholy trinity of eating people after whites and tigers, many fatalities are probably attributable to bulls where their attacker is unknown and unseen. Turbid inshore water is a favourite habitat and they will even penetrate freshwater rivers. In Africa *Carcharhinus leucas* is known as the Zambezi shark. They also swim 60 miles up the San Juan



Bull shark, Carcharhinus leucas.

18mm lens. f4, 1/125th. Provia F. Nikon F4. 2 SB-24 flash guns.

Giant trevally, Caranx ignobilis. 24mm lens f5.6, 1/125th. Provia F. Subeye. Substrobe 200.



river to get into Lake Nicaragua. Historically, there were many attacks in the freshwater rivers of Fiji; the bulls became fond of the scraps from long pig feasts. Missionaries and such. Years ago, when Castaway Resort used to turf their rubbish outside the inner reef in the Mamanucas, bull sharks would come to feed. That was my first experience in the water with bulls, and it was a sobering occasion. The comparison between grey reef sharks and bulls was about

the same as a corgi compared with a wolf. Rabid at that!

It's amazing what the serenity of Brandon can do to the animals, even the divers; his quiet confidence more contagious than the plague. Even though this was my first extended encounter with bulls I felt completely safe (we weren't behind any coral wall and prayers propagate about 5cm underwater) even when a giant trevally barrelled into the side of Brandon's head at full tilt. Lucky he



Giant trevally, Caranx ignobilis.
Sea&Sea 15mm lens, Nikonos III, Velvia pushed one stop. 1/60th f8. Housed SB-26 flash gun.

Bull shark, Carcharhinus leucas. 24mm lens, f4 1/125th Provia F. Subeye. 2 Ikelite Substrobe 200s



wasn't knocked out because I was just lining up a good shot.

From a photographic point of view, there wasn't a hell of a lot of light, though we had sunshine and 20m vis. I used Provia F or Velvia pushed a stop, my old home-made Nikon F4 housing so I could have the benefit of a motordrive and fast, precise manual focus. With the housed Nikon SB-24s on 1/4 or 1/8 power I could whizz off a sequence of shots (7 frames was the longest) as the bull shark opened its mouth to engulf a slab of fish, just missing Brandon's hand, protected with... a gardening glove! Ha!

Sometimes the second dive is over in Beqa Lagoon which is still beautiful diving in spite of the ravages of coral bleaching which have affected some of Fiji's coral. After my film was finished and I was just loitering on the surface, I had this biblical vision; Brandon, way way below, alone, with a slab of marlin, feeding in turn the fish along the reef. There must have been 5000 of them.

So before someone gets eaten, or Aquatrek's insurance gets out of hand, fly over to Fiji (which takes about the same time as downloading this magazine in Fiji) and see this amazing event for yourself. Sundays and Wednesdays are feeding days, and on Fridays Brandon takes the guests of Marlin Bay Resort on the island of Beqa there. Aquatrek is based at the salubrious Centra Hotel in Pacific Harbour which always has room, and there's even a backpackers, Pacific Safari Lodge across the road.

I really hope no one gets bitten, because as always there will be a big fuss, "biologists" will say it upsets the ecology, FVB will say it's bad for tourism. It's about the most exciting thing happening in all of Fiji and makes a meke - the traditional Fijian dance-fest - look like stamp collecting. If you really want to risk life and limb in Fiji just get in a taxi or a mini-bus or, even better, go for a midnight swim in Taveuni.

Pete Atkinson

