

Shortfin Mako Sharks

by Gregory Sweeney

Northeast off the coast of Cancun on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico lies the small island of Isla Mujeres. The island is approximately five miles long and one half mile at its widest point. Just a short ferry ride from Cancun, the island offers beaches, scuba diving, and a relaxing place to shop and dine. In the summer months the island plays host to guests drawn in by the whale shark ecotourism trips. Guests travel out into the Gulf of Mexico and snorkel with the gentle giants. If they are lucky they also may encounter giant manta rays.

Isla Mujeres is best known for wintertime fishing and game fishing of sailfish. The sailfish attract many fishermen, but also underwater photographers. Watching the great coordinated predation of the bait balls is a thrill and photographing it underwater is challenging but rewarding. The sailfish work together as a fast moving team to keep the baitfish tightly packed in the bait ball. Being in the water to witness during this action is as exciting as catching a sailfish on the rod.

Adding to the adventure of Isla Mujeres is the chance to see shortfin mako sharks up close. Captain

Anthony Mendillo is now offering this opportunity to photographers and shark fans during the winter season.

Captain Anthony was the pioneer of the sailfish freediving experience. Also he was involved in early efforts to preserve the sailfishing industry. The fishermen of Isla Mujeres all agreed to a Code of Conduct that only allows traditional fishing methods.

The same spirit of sustainability and responsible tourism extends to the whale shark trip and to the mako cage dives.

Capt Anthony and crew have worked with Guy Harvey Research Institute to catch, tag, and release Makos, which are then tracked to add valuable and previously unknown

Using one of the two ports in the cage, you can get a clear water shot as the mako circles around me

Nikon D300 with a 12.0 – 24.0 mm f4.0 lens ISO400 1/125sec at f/13

The Keen M is a powerful and fast fishboat usually used for sailfish but it has been modified to carry the mako shark cage





The cage fits 2 people with a hooka air supply located in the boat. It has Lexan polycarbonate panels on the sides and one large one in the front with 2 open ports facing front.

Canon EOS 5D MKIII in a Nexus housing with EF15mm f2.8 fisheye lens at ISO 400 1/400 at f/10 – 1/3ev

details about the timing and long distance migratory movements of this vulnerable species. This experience has added greatly to the knowledge of the Mexico shortfin mako population and their overlap with other populations tracked by the Guy Harvey Research Institute. Close interaction with the makos has also taught the crew the secrets of location, behaviors, bait preference, and seasonality. This know-how leads

to a 70% success rate for attracting makos to the boat.

The makos in this area of the Caribbean are large compared to those in some other locations. Average sizes for shortfin makos are 3.2 m (10ft) in length and 60 – 135 kg (132 – 298lb). The Isla Mujeres population averages in the top of that range at 114 kg (250lb). Shortfin makos are a beautiful and photogenic fish in brilliant metallic blue and a white



The mako charges toward me and I take cover behind the bullet proof acrylic panel while he devours the bait

Nikon D300 with a 12.0 – 24.0 mm f4.0 lens ISO 220 1/250sec at f/13

underside. They inhabit offshore temperate and tropical seas worldwide and this pelagic species can be found from the surface to depths of 150m (490ft) normally far from land, though occasionally around islands or inlets. Makos are seldom found in waters colder than 16°C (61°F)

Makos are curious and feel and taste everything with their mouth including the cages, floats, transom, and midwater bait or other targets. Their prey is cephalopods and bony fish including bonitos and swordfish.

They hunt by lunging vertically up and tearing off chunks of flank or fins. Makos swim below their prey and have a high probability of reaching prey before it is alerted due to their high velocity. Makos are the fastest species of shark. This speed and hunting method makes Makos one of only a few shark species to accomplish a full breach out of the water as part of its predatory attack. Captain Anthony has observed makos of all sizes doing this full breach behavior and he has developed



© Anthony Mendillo

A mako shark takes the bait.

Nikon D300 with a 12.0 – 24.0 mm f4.0 lens ISO400 1/125sec at f/13

methods to allow guests to see and photograph the breaches.

Our boat is the very comfortable Keen M , a 41 ft custom Michael Fitz Sportfish with a 580 hp diesel. We leave the dock on Isla Mujeres in the early morning and head to the waters North of the island. The cage is mounted on the back. Once we reached the deep 400 ft water, the trolling lines are baited. No hooks are used so as not to hurt the shark. It did not take long to attract a shark.

When it hit the bait its whole body launched out of the water like a rocket and with tail flapping did a nearly complete flip smacking back into the water on its side with it prize in mouth.

I have my camera set to burst mode with a fast shutter of 1/1250 sec. I will only get a few frames per leap and it happens with little warning. A shout comes from a crewmember and I press my shutter capturing the full breach.

With a confirmed shark in the area, bait crates



Photo by AquaPaparazzi.com

A mako makes a dramatic strike on the trolling bait lifting it out of the water in a full breach.

Canon EOS-1Dx with EF70-200mm F2.8L USM at 1/1250 ,f8.0,-2/3EV,ISO 250

are set around the boat and scum scent slick started behind the boat. Now it is time to deploy cage in the water.

The cage adds a safety factor for the guests and piece of mind for the captain. This area is subject