

The Sharks of Marovo Lagoon

BY DON SILCOCK



There is an old story passed down by the elders of the Marovo Lagoon which tells of a group of villagers out in the open ocean on a fishing expedition, when a quarrel broke out that was so fierce that the men attacked each other's canoes and ripped them apart.

Large sharks appeared quickly and pounced on the stricken men, killing all but one - the only person who did not engage in the fighting.

The man is said to have been helped back to shore by the sharks where he lived to tell the tale and, when he eventually died, his skull was placed at the entrance of the lagoon to remind the shark spirits that his descendants honoured them for their act of salvation.

Perhaps, this tale provides the first clue to the abundance of these creatures in the Marovo, when so many other places have witnessed huge declines in their shark populations.

The twin scourges of shark-finning and long-line fishing are estimated to kill about 100 million of these animals a year. That's roughly 11,000 sharks every single hour and means that somewhere between 80% and 90% of the world's total shark population has already been taken!

So why are there so many in the Marovo Lagoon?



Wild and Home Sharks...

Part of the answer resides in that old story, because while in most "developed" countries we have become conditioned by the media to believe that all sharks are dangerous, in the Marovo, they are considered as either a special fish or spirit guardians.

Life in the lagoon revolves around its waters and swimming is as normal as walking, so from an early age Marovians learn about the inhabitants of the lagoon.

Reef sharks, rather than being feared, are regarded almost like dogs in that their behaviour is generally docile and non-threatening, but they can quickly sense unease and can be potentially dangerous to those who fear or provoke them.

For this reason, they are considered as "home" sharks, and a special type of fish that is at the top of the reef food chain - which is the major source of protein for the people of the Marovo.

For that reason, sharks are not eaten because traditional conservation methods teach them that removing such an important component of the food chain can create an imbalance which could have very serious ramifications!

"Wild" or piru sharks, on the other hand, are the large oceanic sharks which occasionally frequent the outer barrier reefs and the deeper areas of the lagoon. Piru are believed to be spirit guardians and an attack by one is considered as retribution for skepticism or disrespect shown towards the spirits by the victim of the attack.

So for obvious reasons, Marovians steer well clear of these wild sharks!

LOCAL DESTINATION



Shark Finning in the Marovo

While the practice occurs in the Solomon Islands, shark finning generally is at a much lower level than in most areas of the Indo-Pacific.

Two key factors are at work here - firstly the healthy respect sharks are held in plays a major part, but in the mid-2000s, a rise in finning was noted as their price rose due to increased demand in China.

Much of that finning was being done by tuna fishing boats and pressure on this key export industry to comply with international standards was applied. Fearful of losing access to international markets, the tuna operators amended at least some of their ways.

An additional, but very specific factor in the Marovo that has helped to minimise the practice in the lagoon are the enduring efforts by Jill and Grant Kelly of Uepi Resort to make sure the local people understand the real impact of shark finning.

Swimming with Marovo Sharks

In May this year, I visited the Solomon Islands for the first time and finally ticked off one of the key locations on my personal diving "bucket list"!

In all, I spent three weeks diving from Uepi Island in the Marovo Lagoon and Munda in the Roviana Lagoon and was most impressed with the number of sharks to be seen generally.

Having dived extensively across Indonesia and Papua New Guinea over the last 15 years or so, it was a real pleasure to see so many of these marvellous creatures alive and well!

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On virtually every dive, two or three grey reef sharks would be seen, but by far the most intensive experience was just off the Welcome Jetty at Uepi Island.

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The jetty is right on the edge of the deep-water passage between Uepi and its neighbouring island Charapoana, which is one of the main entrances in to the lagoon and swept by strong currents.

The passage is host to several great dive sites, such as Uepi Point and Charpoana Point on the seaward side where the reef edge drops down in to 'The Slot', the 2000-metre deep trench that runs along the barrier reef.

You can almost guarantee seeing sleek grey reef sharks of Marovo when you dive those sites, but for a truly full-on experience, the Welcome Jetty is the place to be!

Best dived on an incoming tide, the trick is to position yourself in front of the jetty at about five metres and wait...for the sharks are used to divers and quite curious, so if you are patient, they will come in and check you out.

The Kellys, owners of Uepi Island Resort, have been diving and snorkelling with the sharks of the Marovo for nearly 30 years. And they say they have never felt threatened by them.

In fact, the way Jill described it, the sharks are comfortable and curious around divers because they have never been threatened by them!

Isn't that how it should be?



Dive veterans Grant and Jill Kelly...sharks are comfortable and curious around divers.

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