



# A Boy's Dream



By Rob Stewart

A filmmaker's quest to portray sharks in a different light resulted in a rollercoaster journey through Central and South America that nearly cost him his life

**WATCHING A SCHOOL** of sharks swim just metres above me is an incredible feeling, almost impossible to describe. Perhaps it's the awe of being in the presence of the perfect predator, sculpted from more than 400 million years of evolution. Or maybe it's the strange sort of kinship I feel with these creatures.

In August 1999, I was a 19-year-old photographer on assignment in the Galapagos, there to photograph my favourite animals: sharks. But instead of photographing this majestic predator, I spent my dives cutting sharks from illegally set long-lines. The experience changed my perspective, and launched me on a quest to discover why sharks are being killed at a rate that could quickly lead to their extinction.



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### TURNING A BLIND EYE

In Asia, shark fin soup is a symbol of wealth, and is served as a sign of respect. A single pound of fin can fetch more than US\$300. Since China began widespread trading with the rest of the world, the popularity of shark fin has boomed, and they are being fished in nearly every country with a coastline. Because shark bodies traditionally don't have substantial value, fishermen began discarding the bodies, keeping only the fins.

An elephant falls for ivory, and the world is up in arms. But 100 million sharks die each year and no one bats an eye. Is it because the general public is petrified of sharks? The media have traditionally portrayed sharks as man-eaters, which, if wiped from the planet would make the world a safer place. We fear sharks, so we don't fight for their survival as we would cuddly pandas or gargantuan elephants.

But sharks are crucial to all life on earth. Sharks are the only large animals to have lived on this planet for more than 400 million years. They have survived five major extinctions, and predate dinosaurs by 100 million years. They were important predators in every ocean even before our current oxygen concentrations stabilised, when there was only primitive life on land.

Realising the extent of the problem, I shifted my focus entirely. I endeavoured to bring the plight of sharks to the public eye, and started researching. Scientists Ransom Myers and Boris Worm from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, are doing interesting work with shark populations. Initial studies suggested shark populations have declined between 50 and 89 percent in the Atlantic Ocean. Further studies estimated large oceanic predator populations to be down 90 percent in the last 50 years, due in large part to shark finning.

As a photojournalist, I made it my mission to write articles and inform the public of the issue. But the articles weren't having the impact I'd hoped for, so I set out to make the film, *Sharkwater*. I wanted people to see what I've seen: an incredible undersea world foreign to most of the human population.

I'd never shot a motion picture, but I had spent thousands of hours shooting still photos underwater, particularly with sharks. I used rebreathers so I had a greater chance of getting close to them. And as a biologist I knew their behaviour. I assembled a crew, and we set off on a journey that changed our lives forever.

### ARRESTED DEVELOPMENT

The logical starting point of our journey was Los Angeles, California. There we joined up with Paul Watson, founder of Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. Watson's ship, the *Ocean Warrior*, was off to Cocos (Costa Rica) and the Galapagos on a mission to deter shark poachers. This trip was a perfect opportunity to get my crew into the most shark-rich waters of the world, and on the front lines defending sharks.

Just 12 days into our journey south, we encountered the *Varadero*, a Costa Rican fishing boat illegally finning sharks in Guatemala. Guatemalan authorities asked Sea Shepherd to bring the boat into port for arrest. The fishermen, knowing their boat would be confiscated, fled, leading to a daylong chase between the *Ocean Warrior* and the *Varadero*. The two boats eventually collided, and the *Varadero* agreed to be escorted into Guatemala.

In a bizarre twist, we were told the Guatemalan authorities had been dispatched to arrest us. It seemed the illegal shark fishing boat





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had pulled some strings. We had no interest in battling a Guatemalan gunboat, so we ditched the *Varadero* and continued to Costa Rica.

Days later, and just hours before Captain Watson was scheduled to sign an agreement with the president of Costa Rica that would allow the Sea Shepherd to actively patrol Cocos waters, the crew of the *Varadero* claimed the *Ocean Warrior* had tried to kill them. The crew was charged with seven counts of attempted murder, and the Costa Rican authorities began searching the boat for footage of the incident. Realising the dream of making a beautiful underwater film about sharks was being crushed before my very eyes, and fearing for our safety, we turned the cameras on ourselves.

## GOING UNDERCOVER

We ended up fighting the prosecution in court for three weeks, before learning about a possible connection between the Taiwanese mafia and our arrest. Finning sharks is illegal in Costa Rica, and yet huge shipments of Costa Rican fins were turning up all over Asia.

During a break from court, we went undercover to film the illegal operation. What we found was shocking. There was an entire block of Taiwanese shark fin operations, all with private docks. I couldn't believe what I was seeing – millions of shark fins drying on rooftops that seemed to stretch for kilometres. We'd uncovered a multi-million dollar shark fin industry that Costa Rican authorities ignored. But why? How is it these "underground" Taiwanese fishing operations, which used private docks, were routinely ignored by Costa Rican authorities?

It turns out Taiwan invests millions of dollars every year in Costa Rica – building bridges, highways, and buildings. Our arrests started to make sense. I realised our situation was tenuous.

When we returned to the *Ocean Warrior*, our lawyer called to explain the coast guard was planning to detain us indefinitely. Captain Watson gave the order to make a break for international waters. Sure enough, the coast guard appeared, hot on our tail and toting machine guns. The *Ocean Warrior* crew strung barbed wire around the ship so the coast guard couldn't board, and the boat went into overdrive. After an hour-long chase, which included some shots fired, the coast guard realised the *Ocean Warrior* was on a mission, and gave up the chase.

## GRUELLING ORDEAL

The *Ocean Warrior's* next port of call was the Galapagos, where we were invited by the national park to patrol that magical marine reserve. Fishermen in the Galapagos have traditionally been poor stewards of their oceans: Over-fishing has nearly collapsed every fishery in the area. With the precious sea cucumber fishery nearly depleted, fishermen were pushing for long-lining to be legalised so they could target sharks. Sea Shepherd, no longer able to help, was forced to leave.

In the Galapagos, I developed a pain in my hip, later revealed to be flesh-eating disease. I was immediately hospitalised. The doctors explained that I was lucky to have caught the infection early, and they would only have to remove my leg. I battled the disease for seven days until it finally subsided, and thankfully I walked out of the hospital with both legs intact.

When I was released, I had to find a way to salvage *Sharkwater*. I'd spent the last four months trying to create an underwater film, but hadn't been underwater yet. I spent the entire budget, and couldn't afford to hire dive boats from which to film sharks.

Luckily, I had friends who owned a boat in Costa Rica. I knew if I could find a way to get there without being arrested, I would finally get underwater with sharks. Using public transportation to avoid detection, I made it to the Costa Rican coast, where an anti-shark-finning rally was underway. The public was protesting the private docks and speaking out against corruption. The publicity surrounding our case brought shark finning into the spotlight. Costa Ricans were rallying for sharks.

## A WINNING FORMULA

After the ordeal, I returned to Canada, still quite ill. After months of visits to specialists I was diagnosed with dengue fever, West Nile virus, and tuberculosis. The time I spent recovering allowed me to reflect on the adventure I'd just survived, and how my beautiful underwater film turned into a dramatic metaphor for man's time on earth.

Sharks have lived in balance with the ocean as the top predator for millions of years. With each shark finned, we're not just destroying a key predatory species, but thousands of other species in the oceans as well. The journey through South and Central America opened my eyes to the role of sharks on earth – not just their importance to ecosystems and to the balance in the oceans, but as an example of a creature that has managed to survive on earth.

Four years and 15 countries later, *Sharkwater* finally came to fruition. The film premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival, and it has since won 10 awards (and counting), at least one in each festival it's been entered in. I couldn't be happier with the response the film is getting. It's a sign of hope that a film about sharks can truly touch people's lives. **SD**



**ROB STEWART** Canadian Rob Stewart is an award-winning wildlife photographer who began taking underwater photographs at the tender age of 13. At 18, he became a certified scuba instructor trainer and holds a Bachelor of Science in Biology. Stewart spent four years travelling the world as the chief photographer for the Canadian Wildlife Federation magazines and has logged thousands of hours underwater, using the latest in rebreather and camera technologies. His first film, *Sharkwater*, a full-length feature based on a true-life adventure, received its world premiere theatrical release at the Toronto International Film Festival.

Beginning in April, catch *Sharkwater* in theatres in North America and Europe. *Scuba Diver Australasia* readers: Stay tuned for exciting future promotions when *Sharkwater* reaches Asia Pacific shores!