

*Face-to-Face With Pregnant*

# Bull Sharks

*in Mexico's Playa del Carmen*

Text and photos by Larry Cohen





Bull Sharks



**Observing bull sharks up close is a profound experience, where the safety of divers and the protection of sharks are crucial considerations. Underwater photographer Larry Cohen shares his impressions and photos of diving with pregnant bull sharks at Playa del Carmen, in Mexico.**

Every year in November, a large number of pregnant bull sharks migrate to the Playa del Carmen coastline, where they remain until February or March. Female sharks separate from the males

to protect their juveniles from being eaten. Since around 2007, dive shops and boats have been bringing divers to observe the sharks. While some shops chum the waters and feed the sharks, others believe it is more natural to see the sharks without feeding.

On a non-feeding dive, there is no guarantee of seeing sharks or how close you will get. However, a feeding dive ensures a close encounter with the sharks. During a feeding dive, divers can expect an exciting, high-energy experience, as the sharks come within inches of their heads. But the question remains: Is this safe for divers and beneficial for the sharks? In the

past, more dive operations favored non-feeding dives, but in recent years, this has shifted toward feeding dives.

### Safety and regulations

On 31 January 2011, a Canadian tourist swimming off Cancun was bitten by a shark, local media reported.<sup>1</sup> The event took place near the mangroves in murky water, making it impossible to identify the shark species. Due to the size and shape of the bite, it was determined to be a juvenile shark. Researchers classified it as an exploratory bite, according to Luis Lombardo,

<sup>1</sup> AFP

Shark feeders must have a shark-feeding permit (above). The quality and quantity of fish provided to the sharks are regulated (top right). Shark feeders wear chain mail suits in case a shark mistakes an arm for a fish (top left). Every year in November, pregnant bull sharks migrate to Playa del Carmen (previous page).





Bull Sharks



Female sharks usually stop eating just before giving birth to avoid cannibalism (top left); During a feeding dive, divers can expect an exciting, high-energy experience (top right); Divers position themselves behind the line on the sea bottom (left).

a marine biologist and Head of Projects and Operations with the Saving Our Sharks Foundation (SOS). This incident raised concerns among hotels along the Playa del Carmen coastline, especially since dive operations were feeding the sharks.

In response, local dive centers, SOS (which includes volunteer marine biologists) and the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (CONANP) began conducting research and communicating with hotels. They developed a procedure **manual** to ensure divers' safety and prevent significant behavioral changes in the sharks. Today, this is one of the most regulated and respected shark dive sites in the world.

Feeding the sharks in one area attracts more sharks to that location, reducing the number near swimmers—something the hotels agreed was beneficial. Additionally, according to Lombardo, studies show that bull shark diving generates an estimated US\$1 million annually, both directly and indirectly, for the Playa del Carmen economy.

Female sharks usually stop eating just before giving birth to avoid cannibalism, stated Lombardo. However, when they are fed, they eat willingly, but the feeding did not change their migratory behavior. These sharks continue to leave Playa del Carmen in February or March, some having been tracked by SOS researchers. The sharks

then move through the Bahamas and up to North Carolina. Monitoring has shown that many of the same individuals return every year.

**Fisher permits and fund**

Shark fishing was once common in the area. Fishers are required to possess a valid permit, said Keila Kasai, a SDI/TDI Instructor Trainer and Safety Diver at Pepe Nando Divers. The permit enables fishers to sell their shark catches at any time. It is a lifelong permit, which can be passed down through families.

To help prevent shark overfishing while still supporting fishers' livelihoods, the local dive community pays fishers annually not to fish. Each diver who





Pregnant sharks separate from the males to protect the juveniles (left). A portion of the charter fee goes toward paying fishermen not to catch sharks (above).

books a shark dive contributes to this fund. According to Kasai, this arrangement has successfully saved many sharks' lives, allowing their populations to grow, and it is not unusual to see up to 20 sharks during a feeding dive.

**Diving**

As per SOS/CONANP guidelines for bull shark diving, divers are required to wear full wetsuits, and all gear must be dark or neutral in color to avoid attracting the sharks and creating unsafe situations. Divers have to stay close together, so they appear as one large mass, reducing the likelihood of an accident.

Close encounters with giant female bull sharks are a dream for underwater photographers. Both extreme

wide-angle and fisheye lenses work well, but strobes or lights are prohibited. In the past, some of this gear produced a low-pitched humming sound that could stress the sharks. New technology has eliminated the humming sound, but additional light could be distracting for other divers.

**Shark Point**

Shark Point is about a 10-minute boat ride from the beach. Divers must walk across the beach and enter the water to reach the boat. At Shark Point, there is a mooring buoy attached to a long line that sits on the sea bottom at a depth of 24m (~80ft). Each dive boat has a specified time, allowing 30 minutes on the site.

The dives are no-decompression dives, using a single aluminum 80 (AL80 / 11L) tank, with a maximum bottom time of around 25 minutes, depending on how long it takes to get the entire group in the water. The time allotted for each boat is strictly enforced.

Divers enter the water, descend the mooring line, stay negative and position themselves at the bottom, behind the line. Everyone must stay close together, lie flat on the bottom and keep their arms close to their bodies.

In front of the group, one or two divers with a feeding permit in chain mail suits are responsible for feeding the sharks. The quality and quantity of fish provided to the sharks are regulated. Divers must follow the guide's and safety divers' instructions. While touching



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or feeding the sharks is prohibited, this does not prevent the sharks from occasionally bumping into the divers.

**Benefits**

Aside from a free meal, more protection and understanding are other benefits for the sharks. People are more inclined to safeguard what they can see and interact with.

Kasai, a safety diver with the Pepe Nando Divers' teams that take divers to see sharks, takes pleasure in witnessing the joy that these encounters bring. On one occasion, her team guided a blind diver, who could sense the vibrations of the sharks, resulting in one of the best experiences of the diver's life. Kasai was diagnosed with cancer in 2021, but her love for being with sharks and sharing these moments with others has played a significant role in helping her stay in remission.

Many divers visit the Riviera Maya for technical and cave diving. If you happen to visit during bull shark season, using a single AL80 tank to observe these magnificent sharks is an experience worth getting salt-water on your gear! ■



Special thanks go to Keila Kasai at **Pepe Nando Divers**, Luis Lombardo at **Saving Our Sharks** and Jessica Alejandra Iniguez Gamez at **Me Dive Center**.

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pher based in New York City, USA. He offers underwater photography courses and presentations to dive shops, clubs and events. Visit: [liquidimagesuw.com](http://liquidimagesuw.com)

SOURCES: AFP, CONANP, PEPE NANDO DIVERS, SAVING OUR SHARKS FOUNDATION



Shark Point is one of the most regulated shark dive sites in the world (top left). It is just a 10-minute boat ride from the beach (top right). Feeding has not changed the sharks' migratory behavior (above). Other fish species come to Shark Point for a free meal (left). See the **video**.

