

A grey reef shark with  
blacktip reef shark in  
French Polynesia



FRANK PORCHER

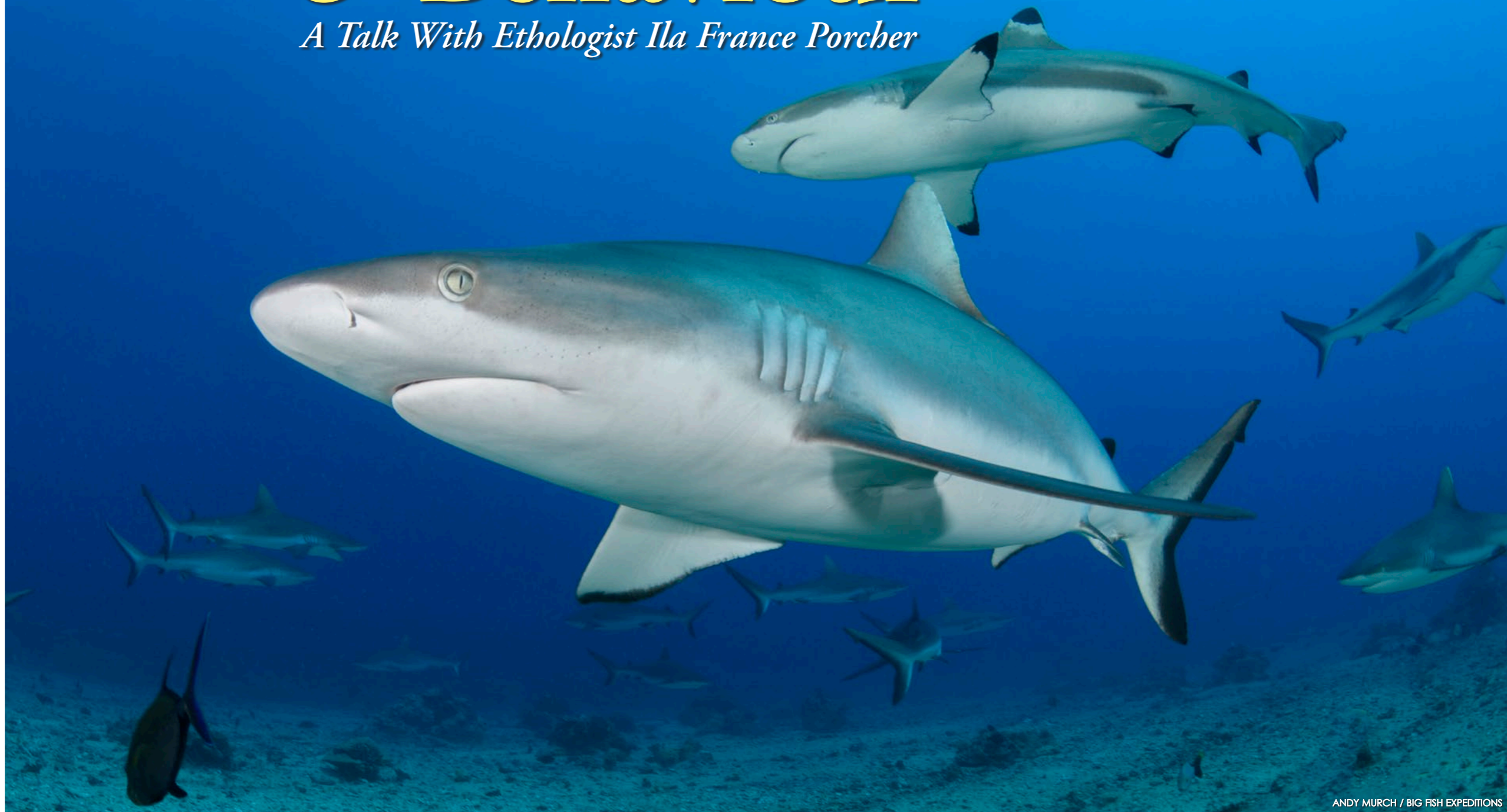
Ethologist Ila France Porcher

Interview edited by G. Symes  
Shark photos by Andy Murch

**Ethologist Ila France Porcher spent seven years observing wild sharks in French Polynesia and Florida, uncovering astonishing insights into their emotional lives, intelligence and social dynamics. Her groundbreaking work challenges long-held assumptions, revealing sharks not as mindless predators, but as sentient, complex beings capable of memory, attachment and even moral judgment. Her findings offer a powerful counter-narrative to sensational media portrayals and highlight the urgent need to rethink how we view—and protect—one of the ocean’s most imperilled predators.**

# Shark Sentience & Behaviour

*A Talk With Ethologist Ila France Porcher*



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*GS: In your seminal books on sharks, **The Shark Sessions** and **The True Nature of Sharks**, you describe previously undocumented behaviours and observations of sentience in sharks, which you studied in Tahiti over a seven-year*

*period. What were some compelling behaviours you observed that suggested sharks possess cognitive abilities?*

*IFP: On one occasion, I could only stay at a feeding session for a*

*few minutes, and when I lifted the anchor into the kayak, the sharks (as well as the fish present) all left the food and circled me. But I climbed out of the water and left anyway. Several sharks circled the kayak*

*as I paddled across the lagoon and started down the bay towards home. Eventually, they began circling back to the lagoon, then returning to me. I was far down the bay when they finally departed.*





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Lemon sharks (left) and tiger sharks (below) at Tiger Beach, Little Bahama Bank in the Bahamas; Blacktip reef shark in French Polynesia (right)

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became aware of me, and, as I rose back to the surface, she came zooming vertically with me as I flew towards the light, her ventral surface close to mine. We were about the same size. Rushing together through the vast blue space, we gazed eye to eye, just for a moment. Then, I broke through the surface, and she dived straight down into the blue and disappeared.

I think it was because the sharks were so social with each other, and their emotions were involved with their social lives, that they felt something for

It was the only time this happened. They left the food to come with me, as if being with me was important to them. The incident also showed that they have a sense of passing time, for they recognised that I had only stayed for a few minutes, instead of the usual hour or so.

Once, I was injured and could not come to see them for two months. When I was finally able to return, I paused for a drink of water after crossing into the lagoon. And a shark came gliding slowly past, then undulated against the kayak. More appeared. One slid against the paddle, and all around me, they placidly glided, dorsal fins above the surface, pushing the curves of their bodies against my boat as they swam, going underneath and pressing against it, then again, pressing themselves against the paddle. I could not believe my

eyes, and stroked them as they passed, instinctively responding to what could only be an affectionate gesture. Again, they showed their awareness of time passing—that much more time than usual had gone by since I had visited them.

After that, they always greeted me in this way, and eventually, they would swim up to me, where I sat in the low kayak, and lift their faces from the water to be stroked.

Another time, I was outside the barrier reef and saw Shark One (ed. – so-named for reference in this article) roaming the seafloor. The community of blacktips outside the reef consisted mostly of males, while the females and juveniles inhabited the lagoon, so it was rare for her to visit the ocean. I dived down to see her, but she kept moving away. I was running out of breath when she



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me. Even though everyone told me that they did not feel about me as I felt about them, and that, indeed, one would soon bite me and I would die, I trusted my instincts, and I was right. My beloved sharks did feel something for me.

This has also now been demonstrated through video evidence by Jim Abernethy and others.

*GS: What did you find to be the most unusual aspect of shark behaviour?*

*IFF: There was a four-month-long episode during which the entire company of resident blacktip reef sharks, plus the visitors who joined them, behaved as if they were mad at me, and I had no idea why. Their behaviour started suddenly, without any apparent trigger. They directed a variety of menacing gestures at me, a trend that escalated until they battered my kayak when I arrived at the feeding site. However, I continued the weekly sessions, and often things seemed as if they were return-*





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Blacktip reef sharks at the surface (left) and grey reef sharks (below) in French Polynesia

ing to normal, as I was sure that they would in time.

Then, one evening, after a battle against a rising wind nearing the feeding site, I dropped in the anchor when I lost control of the kayak. Throwing in their food as wild waters washed over the boat, I slid in, aware of only a few sharks around. But, as I fell through the water, several blacktips appeared at my side, with more soaring up between them, obviously assuming that I was more food coming through the surface. The water beyond them was solid with sharks, zooming towards me. When they saw it was me, they descended again.

I found myself in a fairly deep region, and, in the pearly light, it took on an unreal quality. One of the biggest nurse sharks was vertical, presenting a weird centrepiece as it flung its enor-

mous tail around for balance and flailed its fins. Usually, the water was not deep enough for such a huge fish to balance vertically. Everyone was unnaturally excited. I was appalled at the pandemonium.

Suddenly, Sharks One, Two and Three (ed. – so-named for reference in this article) left the centre of the feeding area and swept towards me. The gesture was so swift and unprecedented, so full of conviction, that all my lights went on. They came in triangular formation, as they had done when we had met more than three years before, with Shark Two in front. Normally, in these situations, I would quietly face the shark until she turned away. But this time, she did not turn. As she went under my hands, my sense of self-protection told me that, on no

account, must a large predator be allowed to pass them. So I hit her on her head. It was amazingly hard!

Like lightning, she turned at right angles and shot away, and Shark One was there. I was already raising my knees between her and my chest and finning water into her nose, but she just dodged slightly and kept coming! Leaning backwards, I finned harder, and she turned. Shark Three was arriving simultaneously, and I pushed her away with my hand. She continued in the new direction in which I had pointed her. Back in triangular formation, the three zoomed away, tails waving, and disappeared into the whirling sharks.

It was incomprehensible. But the way violence had broken out after four months of increasingly threatening gestures con-

firmed that they had developed a negative emotion towards me—what passes for rage in sharks, it seemed. Further, their attitude was shared with the visitors who joined them. This is called “emotional contagion” in behavioural science, and it indicates mental and emotional complexity because it shows that their social relationships involve emotion.

Their actions also suggested that, from their perspective, I was wronging them, implying a moral sense, which is possible given their neural complexity. The capacity to expect something and react when it is not forthcoming also requires a complex mental life, for the expected outcome must be

held in mind while waiting, then mentally compared with what happens next.

Yet, for them to be acting together on an abstract idea about something that was not present altogether is considered to be impossible in any species other than our own!

No human mind can know how a shark might view and feel about things. So, in the end, I had to accept that, in spite of my puzzlement and human need to understand, it was impossible for me, ever, to know the reason why the sharks had treated me as they had. But, after this incident, I held the weekly feeding session a kilometre farther along the lagoon, and only visited

the original group sporadically during the day.

*GS: Have other researchers followed your lead with further research into shark behaviour and/or sentience?*

*IFF: Professor Gruber told me that Bimini Shark Lab began studying cognition because of my work, and they have published some studies showing social learning and other examples of cognition in juvenile lemon sharks. There have also been several lab studies establishing that sharks are capable of a variety of cognitive tasks, but my study has never been replicated, even in the short term.*



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Lemon shark at Tiger Beach, Little Bahama Bank in the Bahamas (above)

**GS:** How has the scientific community responded to your suggestion that sharks may feel pain and possess higher mental faculties?

**IFP:** With scepticism. The ability of fish and sharks to feel pain is still fiercely disputed, in spite of the way a host of oceanic stingers evolved precisely because fish are so sensitive to pain.

Though I created my own arguments on the subject initially, in 2003, a fellow researcher established through rigorous scientific experiments that fish do feel pain. However, the researcher, and those who began publishing similar work, came under immediate attack. Industry scientists published “studies” claiming that fish cannot feel pain, and so it seemed to the public that there was disagreement among scientists. However, the fishermen’s argument boils down to the

idea that fish cannot feel pain because they lack a human brain. That means that no animal can feel pain.

This argument basically says that, even if they feel pain, they lack a human brain, so it does not matter. Their stance, called “human exceptionalism”, is typical of the view of the industry in general when it comes to animals, wildlife and nature.

The researcher told me that they know people who have stopped trying to publish material on the “fish feel pain” theme because they are stigmatised for it and are later unable to publish or run into other problems in their careers.

It was very hard for me to publish my paper on the unsustainability of shark fishing because of the way most journals seem to favour industry. All they have to do is send the paper to industry scientists for review, and it will be rejected.



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Nurse sharks, South Bimini Island, Bahamas (above); Whitetip reef shark, White Valley, Tahiti (centre)

The comments give away the attitude of the reviewer.

### Changing perceptions

**GS:** Why are sharks still so misunderstood, and why do you think the image of sharks as mindless killers persists so strongly in the media and public imagination?

**IFP:** After a leading television network treated a segment of

me and sharks the way they did, some friends, members of The Shark Group, and I organised a meeting with its CEOs, to demand a change in the way they have always presented sharks: as scary, man-eaters. The CEOs were very affable, agreed with our representatives and laughingly said that they called it “shark pornography”.

The television series has always drawn maximum view-

ers and been broadcast around the world. People love it—they love horror—and the ethics of demonising a real animal to titillate viewers does not bother the CEOs at all, even though so many shark species are threatened with extinction. The series has earned the network many billions of dollars, and other networks have followed its lead. Our meeting had no effect on the broadcast, though more recently, some information about shark depletion has been provided.

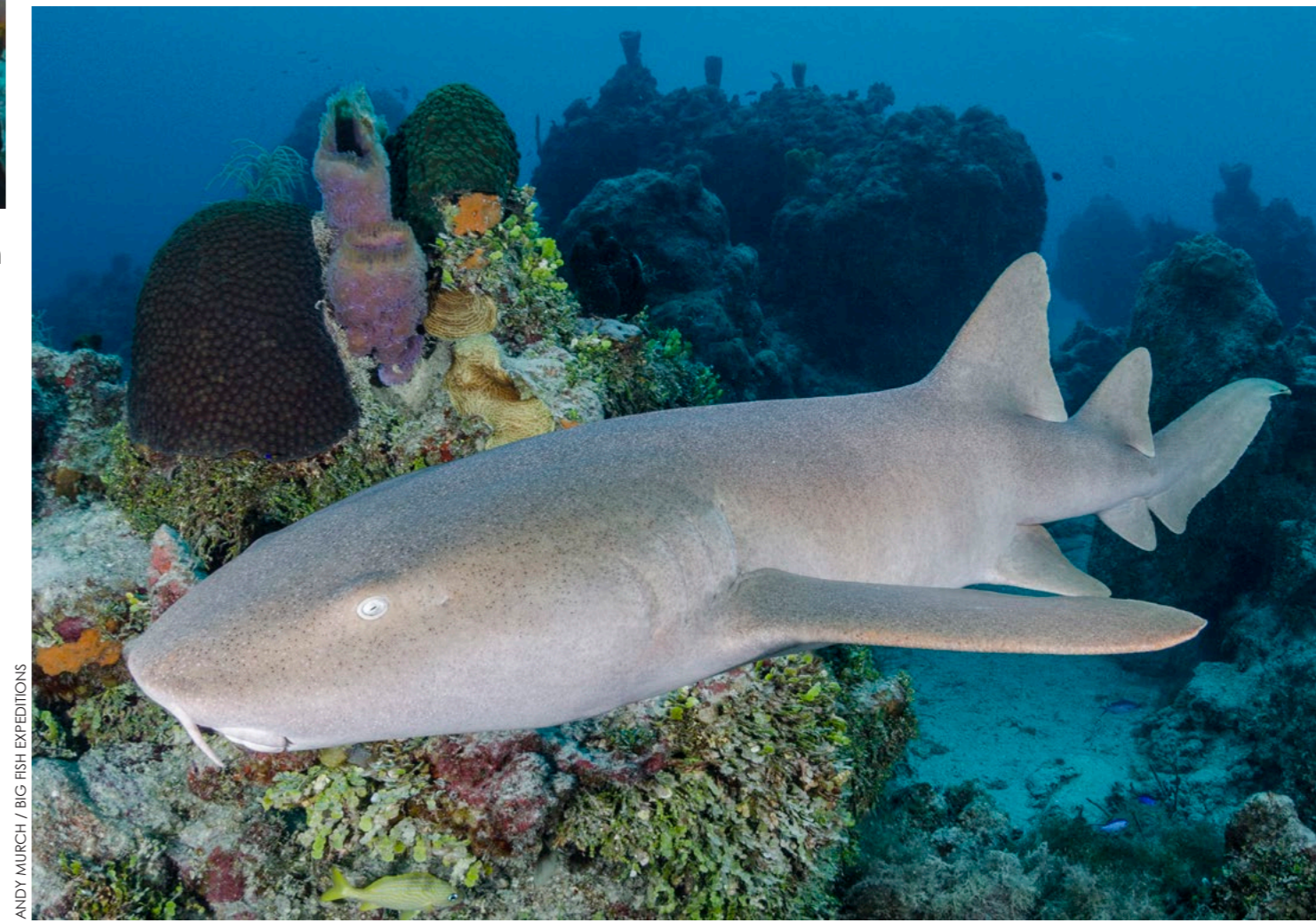
A whole generation growing up watching the television series has developed a fear of the sea, which is opposite to the trend that is needed if people are going to start protecting nature. One woman living in Western Canada told me that she was afraid to put a toe in a Canadian lake as a result of watching the series.

Further, in French Polynesia, the fishermen fought back against those who wanted protection for sharks by saying that if they did not kill them, the sharks would come out on the beach and eat people’s babies. I thought that was ridiculous at the time—Tahitian exaggeration.

But, later, my friend at NOAA, who, throughout his career, tried to regulate shark fishing along the east coast of the United States (the biggest recreational shark fishery in the world), told me that every time they tried to regulate it, fisheries’ spokesmen protested that, if they did not kill the animals, the sharks would come out on the beach and eat people’s babies!

So, between the shark fishermen, who, like hunters, want to justify their slaughter by spreading the idea that the animals





they kill are extremely dangerous, and the media networks that love making nature horror shows for profit, we have the answer to your question. It's intentional.

*GS: What role does your work play in shark conservation?*

IFP: By recounting how sharks really behave, I hope to help breach the barrier erected by the shark horror shows, which stands in the way of shark conservation. And I have been told that I am now one of the top shark conservationists due to my internet writings and scientific papers debunking the arguments of the sustainable shark fishing lobby.

They use "sustainable" terminology for human benefit only, ignor-

ing the intrinsic biological and ecological value of the victims of the shark fin trade. Notably, these scientists never mention how depleted sharks must get before they should be effectively protected. They argue against real protection for sharks, not against unsustainable use.

Another trick they use is to move the baseline. For example, one recent, widely cited study reports a 71 percent decline in oceanic sharks and rays since 1970. Yet, it greatly underestimates the true scale of depletion by ignoring the significant losses inflicted, starting in the 1950s, when industrial fishing resulted in rapid and extreme declines in shark catches. This misleads policymakers and the public by framing shark depletion

as a recent phenomenon when, in fact, the sharks accessible to fisheries were already seriously decimated in 1970.

*GS: After decades of close study, what do you believe is the "true nature of sharks"?*

IFP: One important clue to their true nature is that they do not fight. Though portrayed, even by people who should know better, as scary and dangerous, no one has ever documented sharks fighting. Even when the great sharks gather to feed together, there is far less competition than among terrestrial predators. They have even been seen making an effort to avoid biting each other. Compare that with our own spe-

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Common nurse shark, Chinchorro Atoll, Mexico (above); Tawny nurse shark, Fakarava Atoll, French Polynesia (top right); Blacktip reef shark, White Valley, Tahiti, French Polynesia (top left)





Tiger sharks with remoras at Tiger Beach, Little Bahama Bank in the Bahamas

cies, in which it can be difficult to persuade the males *not* to fight.

Otherwise, many species of sharks seem comfortable travelling great distances through their vast, blue oceanic halls. For them, the ocean is not empty. It is alive with information, a limitless, living map they can read with ease. Peacefully moving, often with a companion, listening to vibrations, noting the changes in Earth's magnetic fields, scenting the flows from the islands and being aware of others near them, they can traverse oceans.

I suspect that knowing vast regions, compared to most humans, is usual for them. Their world is not measured in fences or borders, but in currents and temperatures, in the

shifting shimmer of light, in the subtle signs carried on the water. Some return faithfully to the same reef or bay, guided by senses that humans cannot grasp, while others circle the globe in wide arcs, at home in waters thousands of metres deep as easily as in sunlit shallows.

All the human study of sharks so far has barely scratched the surface. We will never know how they really view things, or even very much about their lives. ■

Read **Part 1** of this series and learn more about sharks in **The True Nature of Sharks** and **The Shark Sessions** by Ila France Porcher. Other books by the author include *Merlin: The Mind of a Sea Turtle*, *The Spirit of Wild*

*Ducks*, *Outwitted by Chickens*, *Birds Are Impossible* and *The Five Star Bears*, all available on **Amazon**. For more information, visit the author's website at: [ilafranceporcher.wixsite.com/author](http://ilafranceporcher.wixsite.com/author)

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