

Alex Buttigieg has been a staunch advocate for the protection of sharks in Malta, spearheading a campaign to protect the great white shark in 1997 that led to its protection in Malta in 1999.

Alex Buttigieg

*The Sharkman of Malta
& His Quest to Protect Sharks*

Text by Ila France Porcher
Photos courtesy of Alex Buttigieg and Andy Murch

Alex Buttigieg, famously known as the “Sharkman of Malta”, is an accomplished dive instructor, shark conservation advocate and researcher whose dedication to understanding and protecting sharks has made him one of the most influential marine conservationists in Europe. Ila France Porcher has the story.



ANDY MURCH



COURTESY OF ALEX BUTTIGIEG

Alex Buttigieg, “The Sharkman of Malta”

Alex Buttigieg’s name has become synonymous with conservation efforts of the ocean’s most enigmatic creatures, particularly sharks. Through his unique blend of expertise in diving, passion for marine life and unwavering commitment to conservation, Buttigieg has earned the respect of divers, conservationists and ocean enthusiasts around the world.

Early life & introduction to the sea
Buttigieg grew up on the small island nation of Malta, an important crossroads in the Mediterranean Sea. Malta’s rich maritime history, vibrant underwater ecosystems and proximity to some of the world’s most biodiverse marine environments played a pivotal role in shaping his future.

From a young age, Buttigieg developed a fascination with the ocean.

Surrounded by a thriving marine environment in crystal-clear waters, he began exploring its wonders. His early encounters with marine life sparked a deep love for the ocean, but it was his passion for diving that would set the stage for his life’s work.

As a teenager, Buttigieg learned to scuba dive. This sport not only allowed him to connect more intimately with the ocean and its inhabitants, but it

also laid the foundation for his eventual success in shark interactions.

He became a dive instructor, which helped him spread his message that sharks and their relatives are not scary and need to be protected. It was his students and diving guests who gave him the nickname “Sharkman”.

Buttigieg’s approach to diving with sharks involved establishing a connection with them. Admiring



Since Buttigieg spearheaded a campaign in 1997 to protect the great white shark in Malta, a total of 15 species of sharks have now received legal protection, including the porbeagle shark (right), sand tiger shark (below), basking shark and shortfin mako shark (next page).

their underwater grace and intelligence, he focused on creating an environment of trust and respect. This allowed him to interact with a variety of species of sharks and other marine dwellers. He often took the time to explain how a calm, measured presence can foster a positive interaction with sharks, and in this way, he helped to dispel the myths and misconceptions that have always surrounded them. Thus, his work helped educate thousands of people about the vital role sharks play in maintaining the health of our oceans and

the ecosystems they support.

Buttigieg's work, as well as his deep understanding of marine life and his ability to interact safely with sharks, soon drew the attention of both the scientific community and the general public.

A mission for conservation

While sharks were generally viewed as dangerous and frightening creatures, Buttigieg maintained from the start that they are essential for the health and balance of the ocean's ecosystems. He worked to change public perception and

highlight the importance of protecting these dramatic and diverse predators.

In 1997, Buttigieg created a website called "Sharkman's World", dedicated to the education, conservation and protection of sharks. He then initiated and spearheaded a campaign to protect the great white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*) in Malta. It took two years, but in September 1999, the Maltese government granted legal protection not only to the great white shark but to the basking shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*) as well.



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Since then, 15 species of sharks have received legal protection in Malta.

In 2001, Buttigieg's website won the Best Personal Website Award at the Malta Web Awards. Advocating for sustainable fishing practices, reducing shark finning and raising awareness about the impact of human activities on shark populations have been at the core of his message. He has been particularly vocal about the serious threat of industrial overfishing, accelerating habitat destruction and the negative impacts of unsustainable tourism practices on shark populations.

Using his platforms on social media, participation in documentaries and public speaking events, he has worked to

educate people about the crucial role sharks play in the health of marine ecosystems. He also contributed information to a variety of scientific books. In particular, in 2008, he co-authored the book *Hammerhead Sharks* with Alessandro De Maddalena.

The Year of the Shark

One of Buttigieg's most prominent projects was to initiate, organise and run The Year of the Shark, first in 2009 and then again in 2019. With the participation of members from his online shark discussion group, The Shark Group, over 80 dive clubs, conservation groups and NGOs from all over the world became involved. The Year of the Shark grew into a global movement, and its

educational material was translated into 14 languages. As a result, there were huge advances in shark awareness and conservation worldwide.

For example, Jack Ma, Chinese intellectual and CEO of Alibaba (an online store like Amazon), announced that shark fins would no longer be sold on Alibaba starting on 1 January 2009, the first day of The Year of the Shark.

The Year of the Shark started a powerful grass-roots movement to publicise the plight of sharks and their relatives—rays and chimaeras—in a united effort to save them from extinction. As The Year of the Shark 2019 began, Buttigieg announced:

"Sharks are still being hunted and killed in huge numbers,

and in some areas, some species have already vanished. We feel the need to boost our efforts once more, and so we announce The Year of the Shark 2019. Let us once again unite and fight for the conservation of these awesome species."

Megamouth sharks: Mysterious giants of the sea
While Buttigieg has worked with a variety of shark species, one of the most remarkable aspects of his career has been his work with the megamouth

shark (*Megachasma pelagios*), a rare and mysterious species that is one of the least understood of all sharks. The megamouth is a deep-water shark that has only been known to science since its discovery in 1976, and it was not until the early 2000s that significant studies of the species began. The megamouth shark is notable for its enormous, wide mouth, which allows it to filter-feed on plankton, jellyfish and small fish in the ocean depths. It is a slow-moving, nocturnal



ANDY MURCH



ANDY MURCH

species that is rarely seen in the wild. Thus, reports of megamouth sharks are extremely important. Scientists are still learning about the full extent of their distribution, and much of their behaviour remains a mystery. Due to their rarity and preference for deeper waters, only a handful of divers or marine researchers have been able to observe them in their natural environment.

Contributions to megamouth shark research

Buttigieg has been keeping

records of every megamouth shark sighting or capture report, which now number 294 individuals. He has actively participated in research efforts to learn more about their behaviour, biology and conservation needs. Working alongside marine biologists and researchers, Buttigieg has helped document sightings, track their movements and study their feeding patterns.

Buttigieg has collected valuable data that has helped scientists better understand the megamouth shark's role

in the ecosystem, insights into their feeding habits, habitat preferences and reproductive behaviour.

In addition to documenting the sharks themselves, Buttigieg has played a key role in raising awareness of the importance of conserving these rare and vulnerable creatures. Due to their elusive nature and the dearth of scientific knowledge about them, megamouth sharks are often overlooked in conservation efforts. Buttigieg has worked tirelessly to highlight their

plight, emphasising that their slow reproduction rates and deep-sea habitat make them particularly susceptible to the accumulating threats of overfishing, global warming and habitat degradation.

Inspiring a new generation of ocean advocates

Buttigieg's work with sharks, especially the megamouth shark, extends far beyond the waters of Malta. As a dedicated educator, he has worked to inspire future generations of marine scientists, conservation-



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COURTESY OF ALEX BUTTIGIEG

Buttigieg's tireless advocacy for sharks has led to the protection of shark species in Malta, including the small-tooth sand tiger shark (left) and the tope shark (bottom right). Buttigieg in the field, camera in hand (below).

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ists and ocean advocates. Through his involvement in documentaries, social media platforms and speaking engagements, Buttigieg has reached a wide audience, including school children, environmental activists and the general public, who are just now beginning to understand the importance of protecting sharks and the ocean.

One of Buttigieg's most important roles is to serve as a bridge between the scientific community and the general public. His ability to engage with both groups, conveying complex marine science in an accessible and engaging way, has made him a unique ambassador for ocean conservation. By showing people how to interact with sharks safely and respectfully, Buttigieg has encouraged countless divers and ocean enthusiasts to follow in his footsteps.

A legacy of conservation

Now retired, the Sharkman of Malta has made an indelible mark on the world of marine conservation, particularly in relation to sharks. Through his dives, tireless advocacy and research on megamouth sharks, Buttigieg has made an important contribution to changing how we view and interact with these important and enigmatic creatures.

His message is clear: Sharks are not to be feared but celebrated as essential guardians of the ocean. His influence as a champion of the sea will endure for years to come. □

For more information, visit: sharkmans-world.org. For a full list of the books and papers Buttigieg has contributed to, visit: sharkmans-world.org/Profile.

Ethologist Ila France Porcher, author of *The Shark Sessions* and *The True*



ANDY MURCH

Nature of Sharks, conducted a seven-year study of a four-species reef shark community in Tahiti and has studied sharks in Florida with shark-encounter pioneer Jim Abernethy. Her observations, which are the first of their kind, have yielded valuable

details about sharks' reproductive cycles, social biology, population structure, daily behaviour patterns, roaming tendencies and cognitive abilities. Visit: ilafranceporcher.wix-site.com/author.

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