

Ila France Porcher photographing a tiger shark in the Bahamas

Interview edited by G. Symes  
Illustrations by Ila France Porcher

**In this rare and illuminating conversation, we speak with a wildlife artist and ethologist who, after moving to Tahiti, embarked on what would become one of the only long-term underwater studies of shark behaviour ever conducted. Her journey—from curious painter to groundbreaking researcher and author of several books on wildlife behaviour—challenges everything we think we know about sharks.**



FRANK PORCHER

# Unveiling the Shark

*Interview with Wildlife Artist Turned Ethologist Ila France Porcher*



Ethologist, author and wildlife artist Ila France Porcher

**GS:** Tell us about your background, how you became an artist and an ethologist, and what first drew you to Tahiti. How did that move change the course of your work as both an artist and ethologist?

**IFP:** When I was a child in British Columbia, Canada, I took refuge from the crises at home in the surrounding wilderness. And there I found wild animals. I began sketching, then painting them, and that is

how I became a wildlife artist. At university, I studied science but eventually chose a career as a wildlife artist anyway. When I married Franck, a French Doctor of Mathematics and Theoretical Computer Science, we

moved to Tahiti, where such experts were needed, and the water was warm for diving. Franck started his own company.

As I settled in, I looked for something to focus on, and since there was no



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wildlife in those volcanic islands, I began exploring underwater.

*GS: Before your first shark encounter, how would you have described your perception of sharks?*

*IFP: I had never thought much about them. I had been focused on Canadian wildlife, though I had heard about shark finning—another worrying case of animal abuse I could do nothing about.*

*GS: Can you recall the emotional shift that took place during your first face-to-face encounter with a shark?*

*IFP: Since I had seen the blockbuster Steven Spielberg film *Jaws*, I expected her to fly into attack mode at the sight of me. But she paid not the*

*slightest attention. Her velvet form, the distinctive shape of a shark, the light rushing over her, struck me to silence. Her smug little face actually looked bored as she passed close by. She was a grey reef shark, and I was enchanted.*

*GS: What caused you to become so interested in sharks?*

*IFP: One night, soon after I arrived in Tahiti, I dreamed I was walking at the edge of a supernaturally brilliant lagoon, brimming with life. Fascinated, I leaned down to look deeply in, and two large sharks, one black and one white, came gliding towards me. The black one swam straight into my arms. As I held him, he spoke into my ear, and I realised that all his fins had been cut off. I awoke in a panic, trying to*

Watercolours, *Emma and Remora* (right) and *Tiger Portrait* (below), by Ila France Porcher

*remember what the shark had said. It seemed terribly important to remember, but I could not. The dream stayed with me, and when, two days later, a ship laden with shark fins sailed into the harbour, I took it as a call for help. It was one of those rare moments when the veil at the edge of one's awareness thinned—something beyond the rational had swept over my life. So, I went looking for sharks.*

## Observing sharks

*GS: How did you find them, and what species of sharks did you study?*

*IFP: Each day, I roamed the lagoon. If I finned to the barrier reef as it got dark, I would nearly always meet a blacktip or whitetip reef shark. In time, I learned that blacktips tended to appear when I stayed very still in the water. If I did not move—not even think—they would sometimes swim right up to my face. But the slightest motion, or rising alertness as the shark came near, would cause them to veer away.*

*GS: What prompted you to begin identifying nearly 600 individual sharks, and how did you come to recognise over 300 individuals on sight?*

*Identifying each blacktip reef shark and watching them as individuals opened a window on their behaviour. As time passed, I brought them fish scraps once a week and roamed the lagoon with-*



*out food at different times in between, staying with any shark I encountered. Eventually, several of them would join me when they found me in the lagoon, and by staying with them, I began to learn about their lives. To help raise the public perception of them, I painted them.*

*At first, I assumed that only about 30 sharks would be using that part of the lagoon. I had no idea that there would be so many. I just kept going, and as the years passed, I kept seeing more, especially during the reproductive season when they travel extensively. I could remember so many because I was so inter-*

*ested and had all of their fin patterns drawn in a book.*

*I had no access to written information at the time—I was just studying them out of curiosity. I was sure that the experts already knew everything about them. But when I got an internet connection three years later, I learned that almost nothing was known about them. No one else had done such a thing, and most people thought that sharks were vicious.*

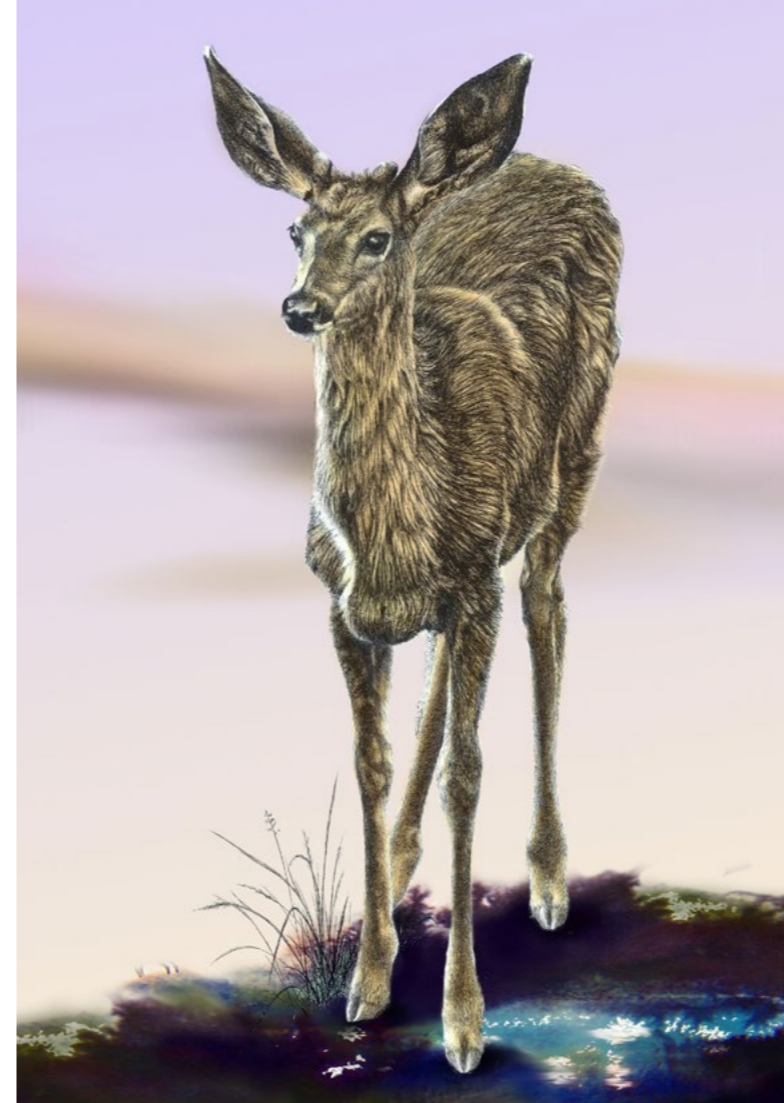
*GS: Why did you continue your study of the sharks for such a long period of time?*

*IFP: I kept seeing new behaviour, and the bond we formed*

*kept evolving. Plus, it was so strange. I would be in a wind-blown kayak on the choppy surface, slide underwater and find myself in silence, surrounded by large, slow-moving animals, who, one after another, would swim up to my face. If you could wander into the forest and be met by a pack of wolves, each of whom came up to you in a formal greeting and joined you, would you stop? I was fascinated—it was the highlight of my life.*

*GS: How do sharks behave differently from terrestrial animals when it comes to social interactions or decision-making?*





Watercolours by Ila France Porcher (left to right): *Timber Wolf*; *The Vigil*; *Mule Deer*; *Waiting*. *Spirit of Opunohu*, airbrushed acrylics, by Ila France Porcher (bottom right).

IFP: A main difference in my opinion is widespread territoriality in terrestrial animals—there is a central area for the nest and a border where intruders are repulsed. That is the essential reason behind fences, nations and wars, for humans are very territorial. But sharks neither sleep nor care for their pups. Further, in the three-dimensional ocean, the need for a territory is questionable. Why fight when you can just swim on? The sharks I knew socialised excitedly with their many visitors without conflict. Further, they had no problem snapping up a fish when they wanted to eat, so they seemed to have little stress in their lives.

GS: How did your background in observing terrestrial wildlife help or hinder your understanding of shark behaviour?

IFP: It was very helpful because, having observed so many other species, I recognised right away how different shark behaviour is. Furthermore, I was accustomed to being alone with a variety of wild animals, and had a great deal of experience, not only through learning, but by being awake to my own instincts in response to their behaviour. So, I was able to cope with the movements of 36-odd sharks and their visitors as it got dark and handle the startling things that happened.

GS: Do you feel that art gives you a different kind of access to animal truth than science alone?

IFP: As an artist, I have always been an intent observer. Book learning is different—there is no hands-on experience with the “other.” So, my approach to wild animals in general

and sharks in particular is fundamentally different from the one taken by traditional scientists. Yet my university studies in math, physics and chemistry, and extensive reading of a range of scientific subjects, have given me a good basis in reality and have allowed me to take an analytical view of what I saw.

### Writing about sharks

GS: Why did you switch from painting them to writing about them?

IFP: A company from Singapore established itself in those archipelagos and began finning the sharks. I went out to see them one evening, and no one was there. Sharks flee when some of them are killed; fishing badly disrupts their communities and social lives. Night was falling when a young female emerged from the gloom and



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moved towards me. She was so weak she appeared to be dying, and a large hook was embedded in the angle of her jaw. She could no longer eat and died three months later.

That was only the beginning of a two-and-a-half-year battle, along with the divers, to secure protection for the sharks. The blacktip community I loved was lost. But now, French Polynesia (where Tahiti is located) is the largest shark sanctuary in the world, with an area comparable to the size of Europe.

## Scientific collaborations

**GS:** *How did your collaboration come about with the late, world-renowned marine ethologist Professor Arthur A. Myrberg, as well as your contribution to the symposium on cognition at the Max Planck Institute in Germany?*

**IFP:** Richard Johnson, a scientist who wrote papers and books about Polynesian sharks, had a dive club on the island of Tahiti, and we often talked. He suggested I contact Arthur. Arthur was very interested in my accounts, and we dis-

Airbrushed acrylics, *Circles of the Sea* (right) and *The Guardian* (below), by Ila France Porcher

cussed each one in detail. I learned later that he also discussed them with his friend, Professor Samuel H. Gruber, of Bimini Shark Lab, who was also a shark ethologist. They both told me at different times that they had thought it was impossible to study sharks as I had done. Professor Gruber mentioned this in the Foreword he wrote for the second edition of my book, **The Shark Sessions**.

**GS:** *What was the outcome of that symposium, or how were your findings received?*



**IFP:** Arthur's presentation of how the sharks were using cognition was well received, and everyone present at the symposium agreed that thinking in animals must be accepted as a scientific reality. But it has taken decades for traditional science to accept that even those animals considered "low" and "cold", like sharks, could be highly intelligent and conscious.

Unfortunately, Arthur died before our paper presenting my information was published, and I was not able to have it accepted because I just did not have the background to revise it satisfactorily. There was also great resistance to the idea that sharks could have such

higher mental capacities at that time. Though Arthur repeatedly encouraged me to publish my findings, I have found it very hard, partly because my study was unique. Reviewers criticise it because they do not believe I could have identified so many sharks, for example, and now, remote sensing technologies are favoured. However, I have managed to publish several papers, including a fairly complete ethogram (a description of the blacktips' behavioural repertoire), and just the last paper on their roaming patterns is still under review.

After my findings were presented at the Max Planck symposium, a film crew from the

BBC came to document my work. For me, their visit was my one and only chance to get the news that the sharks were being slaughtered for a soup recipe, out of the country.

But their production was used for *Shark Week* by the Discovery Channel, and my message about the massacre was cut. Conservation, I was told, was "unpopular". Furthermore, my entire sequence was broadcast to 22 million people in a negative light. The idea that sharks could be capable of cognition, and that a woman working alone could uncover so much about them, clashed with *Shark Week's* formula of



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Acrylics, *On a Coral Reef* (right) and *The Sharks' Lagoon* (far right), and oil painting *Stories in the Wind* (below) by Ila France Porcher

portraying sharks as terrifying, dangerous man-eaters.

So, I wrote down the story of the intelligent lost sharks to get the news out of French Polynesia. And that was my first book, *The Shark Sessions: My Sunset Rendezvous*.

GS: After writing *The Shark Sessions*, you wrote a second book about sharks, *The True Nature of Sharks*. Can you tell us about that book and what prompted you to write it?

IFP: After I spent some time observing tiger and lemon sharks in Florida and the Caribbean with Jim Abernethy of Scuba Adventures, I started putting together a comprehensive picture of



shark behaviour. So, ***The True Nature of Sharks*** lays out what I learned from observing these wild species, highlighting the intelligence behind their actions.

For example, not only the reef sharks in French Polynesia, but also the lemon and tiger sharks in the Caribbean, were seen using the visual limit for concealment. In the ocean, there is little to hide behind, so it makes sense that the tactic of leaving and re-entering the visual range evolved in the ancestral species and is widespread in sharks today. Hiding is considered to demonstrate self-awareness, in that the animal is aware of when it is present and observable, and when it is not.

GS: In what ways do you hope your books on sharks will change how people view these animals?

IFP: My books describe real shark behaviour. They portray events in which the actions of each shark in particular situations are described. So, as the book moves on, readers feel that they are gaining a comprehensive picture of what these unusual animals are like. More than one person has told me that reading *The Shark Sessions* is like watching a movie.

GS: If you could share one message about sharks with the world, what would it be?

IFP: All sharks require immediate protection from the shark fin trade, which could be accomplished through a ban on international commerce in sharks, rays and their parts. This could be put into effect through a CITES Appendix I listing. Since all shark fins are taken by the shark fin trade, all species should be protected. Due to "fins-attached"

policies, even the shark meat market depends on the value of the fins. With more than 90 percent of traditional fish stocks depleted, what is needed is a drastic reduction in fishing effort, so that the oceanic ecosystems can heal; but instead, fisheries around the globe have turned to fishing the top predators because just one soup recipe in just one of the world's cultures has made their fins valuable.

But no animal can withstand long-term targeted, industrial hunting—certainly not sharks.

## Other publications

GS: You have written several other books about wildlife, including *Merlin: The Mind of a Sea Turtle*, *The Spirit of Wild Ducks*, *Outwitted by Chickens*, *Birds Are Impossible*, and *The Five Star Bears*. Please give us a glimpse into what each of these books is about.



Watercolours by  
Illa France Porcher:  
*Flight* (right);  
*Awakening* (top  
centre); *Ermine*  
(far right); *First  
Light* (below)

I FP: They are all about wildlife behaviour, but **The Five Star Bears** is also political in nature. It shows the danger of the hunting lobby to wildlife around the globe, much like I addressed the danger posed by the shark fin trade in *The Shark Sessions*. Like sharks, bears are hunted for the Chinese market in bear parts, a market driven by high prices and wealthy customers uninterested in sustainability. Like sharks, these large wild animals will never satisfy such a market. Through the true account of the desperate efforts by my husband and me to protect 15 bears fleeing forest fires, it calls for an end to hunting, which has devastated ecosystems around the globe, for nature to be valued and for wildlife to be protected and respected.



**The Spirit of Wild Ducks** describes the events in the lives of a flock of wild mallards. One special hen accepted me into her confidence and introduced me to the rest of the nervous, hunted birds, allowing me to document something of their experiences. Through vivid portraits of individuals, their nuanced communication and behaviour show them to be conscious creatures confronting dangers they cannot grasp, from hunters to sickness from pesticides. It is a short book, illustrated with 750 photographs that show the actions described.

Three of my books are based on my rehabilitation cases. **Merlin: The Mind of a Sea Turtle** tells the story of the sea turtles I rescued in French Polynesia. Countless difficulties pursued me because there, these exquisitely designed marine reptiles are a favourite food.

I ran a clinic for distressed seabirds while I was there and quickly learned that the most abused bird was the junglefowl, the ancestor of the domestic chicken. Soon, I had a large flock living naturally in the garden and another flock wild in the nearby jungle. So, my book, **Outwitted by Chickens: The Bird Who Killed the Tiger**, draws on eight years of observing them. Through accounts of individual birds, it portrays their emotions, deceptions, communication and struggles, ultimately highlighting unexpected parallels with human society. The most intelligent animal I have known, wild or domestic, was a wild alpha male junglefowl. But agribusiness would certainly not want people to think that chickens are extremely intelligent super birds.

**Birds are Impossible: The Supernatural Ways of the Fliers** presents the most interesting individuals I saved in

my clinic, especially seabirds, and is enriched by scientific findings about their abilities. It ends with a remarkable moment just two weeks before I left the country. I was walking across the parking lot of a superstore on a different island, and a seabird began circling me. I stood turning with the bird for many minutes, wondering who it could be. A small crowd gathered, and someone asked me if I knew the bird, but I could not tell who it was.

Eventually, its circles widened, and it drew away and vanished into the blue air. It was astonishing that the bird could have recognised me—that it actually looked closely enough at different people to pick me out of a crowd, tens of kilometres away from the place we had known each other, and at least seven years later. The bird had outdone me, for I had not recognised him (or her). Such visual

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Airbrushed acrylic, Harmony (right), and watercolour, *Blacktip Shark* (below), by Ila France Porcher

powers of discernment were far beyond my own capabilities and left me daunted by the supernatural ability of the small flier.

GS: What are your upcoming projects or events? Lastly, is there anything else you would like to share with our readers?

I FP: I am working on another scientific paper that shows, in a different way, why sharks need immediate protection from international trade. I am still trying to protect the sharks who called to me, so long ago, through a dream. ■

All of Ila France Porcher's books, including **The True Nature of Sharks**,



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**The Sharks Sessions, Merlin: The Mind of a Sea Turtle, The Spirit of Wild Ducks, Outwitted by Chickens, Birds Are Impossible and The Five Star Bears** are available on **Amazon**. For more information, visit the author's website at: [ilafranceporcher.wixsite.com/author](http://ilafranceporcher.wixsite.com/author).

FURTHER READING:

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