

# Wolfgang Leander

Text by Arnold Weisz  
Photos courtesy of Wolfgang Leander

**Shark man Wolfgang Leander has taken on legendary status in the diving world with his intimate work with sharks of all kinds. X-RAY MAG's Arnold Weisz talks with the shark conservationist to find out the story behind the legend.**

LEFT: Wolfgang Leander with tiger shark in the Bahamas



WL: No, they are not. However, sharks are wild animals and should be treated with much respect. Even harmless shark accidents typically get a media coverage that is way out of perspective. So, many people still believe that sharks are out to attack people indiscriminately. That, of course, is not the case at all. I do feel quite relaxed and comfortable swimming with a pack of large sharks commonly, and wrongly, referred to as *man-eaters*. Humans are not on the menu

but intuitively, I believe to have some sensitivity for animals. I was, and am, always circumspect in the presence of sharks, and I observe their body language in different circumstances keenly.

Sharks are normally shy animals, and they all have their own personalities, as is the case with any other animals. You have to know that. With the first hand knowledge I have acquired over the years, I can tell in what mood a shark is. Few are bold, or you might even say, aggressive; that, however, very much depends on circumstances. In general, sharks are quite predictable—but you have to know their behavior intimately.

How can you learn that? It's rather easy. Sharks have a distinctive body-language; you have to learn it pretty much like any other foreign language, except that you don't have to struggle with grammar, syntax and other linguistic requirements. One talent in learning shark body language is, however, crucial: You have to have a sharp and deductive sense of observation.

AW: You freedive rather than scuba dive. What is the reason for this?

of sharks. Contrary to the widely accepted belief, they are not attracted by human blood. So, if you bleed underwater, and sharks are around, you have nothing to fear—your blood will not incite them to bite you.

AW: Tell us a bit more about your learning experience swimming with sharks.

WL: I am not a shark behaviorist

AW: How did it all start?

WL: Almost 65 years ago when I was six and saw the first images of adventurous helmet divers and what was then considered *monsters of the deep*—sharks, killer whales, giant squids. My passion for the submarine world has not diminished; it has transformed with the passage of time. I guess my relationship with the Big Blue always reflected the

prevailing zeitgeist vis-a-vis the oceans, as it were. In the 50's and 60's, for example, the abundance of marine life seemed to be as endless as the surface of the seven seas. Nobody would have imagined that overfishing and pollution could ever become an issue of concern.

I started diving at age 14 as a spearfisherman and would catch almost anything that moved. Mind you, I don't feel bad about it in

retrospect, as all diving pioneers did the same thing. Hans Hass, for instance, would spear moray-eels, rays and nurse sharks for the heck of it. Today, I share the preoccupation of most experts about the health of the oceans that is at risk.

Take sharks. Before getting to know them from personal experience, and realizing that their true nature has nothing to do with the way they have been,

and unfortunately, are still being portrayed; I considered them to be *dangerous* like everybody else and would have killed them with a powerhead, or bang-stick, without remorse. Now, I would not allow anyone in my presence to be rough to a shark, let alone kill it.

AW: Would you then say that sharks are not dangerous predators, not even potentially?



I was glad, but at the same time, I wished it would have returned... I relived this brief encounter before going to sleep that night over and over again, as if to try to preserve that magic moment I had waited so long for it to finally happen.

*AW: What is it, deep down, that fascinates you about these animals (sharks)?*

*WL: Deep down? Hmmm. Let me think... I'd say, it's a combination of several factors—it's the knowledge that sharks are very ancient, and at the same time, contemporary creatures that have adapted to their environment in a most extraordinary manner. You could say they are the paradigm*

*of evolution; no other highly developed species in our planet has survived more than 400 millions of years. Sharks remind us that we are late comers, and that we should not take ourselves too seriously. I guess that I also feel, perhaps a bit morbidly, attracted to them because of the excitement of facing an animal that could, technically, devour me. To be eaten alive by a wild animal was a real threat in the dawn of human pre-history.*

*I am convinced that we carry this deep-seated fear in our*

*genes—a fear that is archaic but quite real in the sense that we are not only relentless conquerors of the unknown, but at the same time, fearful, or at least apprehensive, of the dangers that lurk behind the horizon or in the depths of the oceans. There are many, many people who feel something similar about sharks but find it difficult, as I do, to describe. These creatures somehow seem to touch very deep layers of our own evolutionary make-up. I don't know... Does this make any sense to you?*

*AW: I guess it does... Let us touch a rather touchy subject. Some animal activists think it is wrong to touch or feed wild animals. We know you do it. Can you tell us why?*

*WL: I am glad you broached the subject, as I am fully aware it is a controversial one. To begin with, I like to touch people I like, and the same goes for animals. It is not an unusual sight to see me petting a stray dog in the streets of my hometown, Cochabamba. I don't think an animal protector would criticize me for expressing my feelings for a creature physically. I pet sharks because I like them. I have also petted octopuses, as gently as I would pet my grandson, Wolfie. Octopuses are, by the way, most tender, playful and intelligent animals. Once you get to know them, it is hard not to fall in love with them.*

*Animals in general, wild and domesticated, are very sensitive and responsive to physical contact. I see nothing wrong with touching a shark if you do it gently. As long as you don't hurt*

*WL: Everybody asks me this question, understandably so, when it seems to be logical to scuba dive, as it allows you to stay down, deep and long. My answer is simple: I don't like having cumbersome equipment on my body; it makes me feel as a stranger in the underwater world. I'd rather hold my breath than breathing underwater. Depending on the technique you apply, you can have the sensation of being slightly intoxicated by a rush of euphoria not comparable to any other "good" feeling. And I am*

*not talking about free-diving as an extreme sport.*

*I freedive because it gives me the feeling of freedom; it is a mental exercise more than a physical challenge. Philosophically speaking, freediving allows me to feel one with nature much more intensely than being on land which is my habitat. There is also a practical reason that speaks for freediving—freedivers find it normally easier to get close to, and interact with, large animals than scuba divers. I have dived only four times with tanks back in*

*the 60's—didn't find it appealing. I began to dive as a freediver, and I will end my life as a freediver.*

*AW: What was your first close encounter in open water with a big shark like?*

*WL: Believe it or not, I wasn't terrified or anything like that, as I didn't feel threatened, despite all we knew in those days about sharks. I was spearfishing in the British Virgin Islands in the fall of 1968, all by myself, which is what I always do, when I saw this mighty*

*12ft shark swimming by about 12-15ft below me. I was going down to target a nicely sized mackerel with my gun, and as the shark suddenly appeared in my field of vision, I stopped moving so as to not get it interested in me. From the way it swam, I immediately realized that the shark didn't mind my presence at all. I was relieved, but as you can imagine, I was totally captivated by the sight of that huge shark, and just marveled at it, as it slowly vanished into the blueish mist.*

*The shark did not come back;*

the shark, or scare it deliberately by being rough, you do not harm it. If others think differently, well, that's their view. To me, this is not a matter of ethics, as some animal protectors would claim, but a personal decision to express affection. The same is true of feeding. I don't see what could be wrong feeding a shark? Because you risk being nipped? Or because it could alter their feeding habits, which, by the way, has yet to be proven. Well, again, the choice is yours.

I do not encourage others to pet a shark—I have had a long training interacting with sharks, and began touching them as I got to know them better and better. Thus, I do not consider it to be risky at all. However, I won't put on underwater rodeo shows as some do, also I don't want to demonstrate how *macho* I am interacting closely with sharks. If I want to prove anything at all, it is to show that sharks are amenable animals, and definitely not aggressive toward humans.

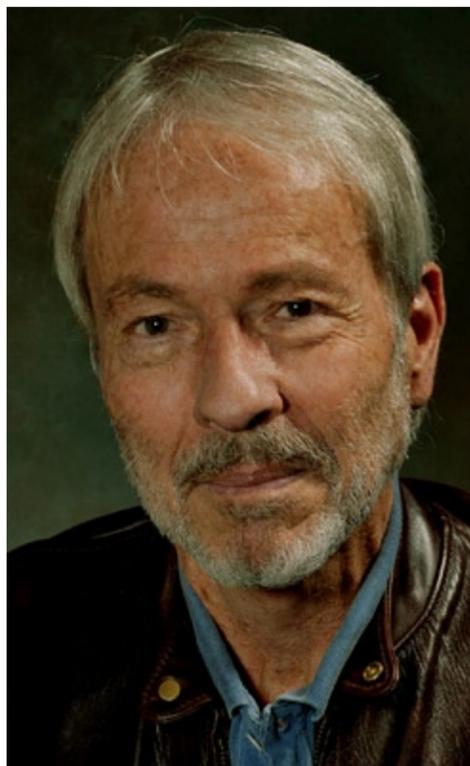
*AW: Shark diving has become a popular 'product' offered by many dive centers around the world. What are your reflections around this?*

WL: There is absolutely nothing wrong with that. Quite the contrary—sharks are still shrouded in an aura of mystery. Shark diving has turned countless divers into informed individuals with a new, caring outlook on sharks. I am very pleased to see that more and more people dive with sharks and, thus, find out for themselves how incredibly beautiful and vulnerable these animals are. Although there is a growing

awareness of the tremendous pressure many sharks species are exposed to due to overfishing, we need more shark ambassadors to actively engage in conservation matters.

*AW: It seems that shark protection is getting more traction even within political establishments, and more and more countries are taking measures to save these animals from extinction. Why do you think it is so difficult to protect sharks?*

WL: As in other complex situations, especially when they have a global dimension, there are too many conflicting interests to provide you with an easy answer. I can only highlight some of the problems concerning this issue. Shark fishing, uncontrolled as it is, is a huge business world-wide. Sharks are being killed to a very large extent for their fins to satisfy the growing demand for shark



fin soup, as you know. By now, it is general knowledge amongst politicians that the populations of many shark species are extremely vulnerable to overfishing. Why? Basically because sharks mature slowly and give birth to only a few young at a time.

Tens of millions of sharks are being killed every year, and in many countries, the sharks being 'harvested' for human consumption are getting smaller and smaller, long before they reach sexual maturity. It is not difficult to imagine how negatively this will affect the populations of sharks. It is also common knowledge that sharks play a vital role in maintaining the balance of life in the oceans. The chain of

marine life depends on healthy shark populations. To picture that far too many shark species are in rapid decline, some of them already facing extinction so some gourmets in China and other Asian countries can savor a bowl of shark fin soup every now and then, is just mind boggling!!

You would think that in view of such a catastrophic scenario, it should be easy to simply ban shark fishing to save the sharks from being massacred for the least nutritious of their body parts. Well, it is not. You have the fishing industry lobbyists; you have the mighty shark fin mafia, not much less criminal than the drug cartels; you have the politicians who feel that they have to be responsive to

their constituencies, among them big business and conservationists; and you have a lot of corruption, mainly in the poorer maritime countries.

*AW: Talking about non-profit conservation groups, what about them? Are they powerful enough to bring about the desired changes in shark protection?*

WL: Unfortunately, some of these non-governmental organizations have become quite *political*, as it were. I will restrain myself from getting too specific, but what I could see during the last years has been somewhat sobering, to put it mildly. With some exceptions, the shark conservation community—if

I could call it a 'community'—has degraded itself to some sort of a 'vanity fair'. As my son, Felix, put it recently, photographers, videographers, scientists, non-profits, activists and the hundreds of online groups that have sprung up are often driven by rather egotistical motives. There is, according to Felix, a lack of togetherness because too many individuals want credit—they want credit for bringing the media's attention to something, changing a law, getting a grant and so forth.

Many people have their own agendas and are just using the sharks and their misfortune as an opportunity to springboard themselves to fame. I believe

Wolfgang Leander (left) with tiger shark (above)



Wolfgang Leander shares a gentle moment with a tiger shark (left) and a reef shark (below)

## Leander

of shark fin soup amounts to preserving cultural values, which is an absolutely ludicrous contention that shouldn't be even discussed.

*AW: One last question—which is your preferred shark dive spot?*

WL: Definitely Tiger Beach in the Bahamas! This is a place where diving conditions are absolutely ideal: Stunning visibility, plenty of sharks, docile

and friendly lemon sharks, and, of course, the truly impressive tiger sharks—forceful, elegant, extremely gentle—all in rather shallow water. The sandy bottom, which is a perfect backdrop for stunning images and video sequences, makes artificial lights, even flashlights, almost superfluous—such is the incredible illumination that is the trademark of that place. I have been diving there at least once a year since March 2007 and will keep going back, no

question about it.

In fact, you will find me at Tiger Beach during the first two weeks of November, on-board the *Dolphin Dream*. I believe the travel arranger, Dominique Macan of DiveAdvice, has still two or three open spots. If your readers want to check the availability and dive with tiger sharks and some very cool people from many different countries, here is the link: [www.diveadvice.com/Tiger\\_Shark\\_Diving.htm](http://www.diveadvice.com/Tiger_Shark_Diving.htm) ■

Felix is right. I have once asked an internationally well-known videographer and author why he got interested in sharks. His answer was as telling as it was disarmingly honest: "Because sharks sell." I have seen him diving with sharks, and could see from the way he interacted with them that he had no feeling whatsoever for them. If everyone's agenda was to save sharks, sharks would be safer today.

To be fair, there are very efficient and professional shark conservation groups that work behind the scenes as inconspicuously as possible with remarkable results. The Bahamas have recently enacted a total ban on shark fishing. Two conservation organizations—one local, the other international—were instrumental in working actively with members of the Bahamian government for their parliament to declare the archipelago a shark sanctuary. The fact that other maritime nations have also moved decisively to protect their sharks shows that the work of shark conservation groups, which were

behind these initiatives, can be highly effective in bringing about the changes that are essential for the survival and preservation of sharks.

*AW: You have been involved with many campaigns against shark finning and for protection of sharks. In these years, we see how more and more states are banning shark fin products and practices, and traders, too. I presume one of the more spectacular victories must have been when the giant Chinese owned trading portal Alibaba.com finally succumbed to the pressure and forbade shark fin products on their portal. What do you consider the biggest victory, and what is the biggest challenge lying ahead?*

WL: You know, positive outcomes in shark conservation—victories as you call them—are always a result of team work and cooperation. If you have committed people trying to make a difference, and if they are ready to leave personal agendas behind, putting the sharks first instead of self-

promotion—as I said are rather common tendencies in the shark conservation *business* as I call it—I cannot think of a biggest victory. I see many.

You mentioned that there is an ever growing number of countries that now fully protect their sharks. That is extremely encouraging, as I believe it will have a contagious effect all over the globe. The biggest challenges lying ahead are to achieve an international agreement to extend the protection of sharks beyond the territorial boundaries of the maritime nations, and to further enlighten the people about the important role of robust shark populations in maintaining healthy oceans.

In my view, one of the most urgent goals is to bring the educated Chinese into the conservation boat. Some conservation groups are already working on it, quite successfully, as I understand. I am absolutely sure that the younger generation in China will eventually be on our side, and will challenge those reactionary traditionalists that maintain that the consumption

