

The poster for Steven Spielberg's 1975 blockbuster film *Jaws*, based on the book by Peter Benchley, published by Doubleday in 1974

Jaws at 50: This Shark Still Has Legs

Text by Gil Zeimer
Photos by Virginia Bria, Carrie Roseman and Amos Nachoum

Sharks have taken a giant bite out of Wendy Benchley's life for over five decades... and she could not be happier. Gil Zeimer interviewed Wendy, the wife of Peter Benchley, who passed in 2006. They discussed what Peter's novel *Jaws*, the movie and its longevity have meant to her, as well as her diving experiences and her current role as a global ambassador for shark advocacy.

From the success of her late husband Peter Benchley's novel to the Steven Spielberg-directed summer blockbuster to the global hoopla surrounding its 50th anniversary, Wendy Benchley is now best known as an environmentalist, ocean conservationist and shark policy advocate.

Shifting perceptions

"Peter grew up in a literary family

and wanted to be a novelist from a young age," said Wendy. "His father, Nathaniel, encouraged him to write a thousand words daily to give his brain that mindset and avoid writer's block. He had the genes and the absolute passion to write. After working as a speechwriter for President Lyndon



CARRIE ROSEMAN

Wendy Benchley, wife of the late Peter Benchley, who wrote the best-selling novel *Jaws* in the 1970s

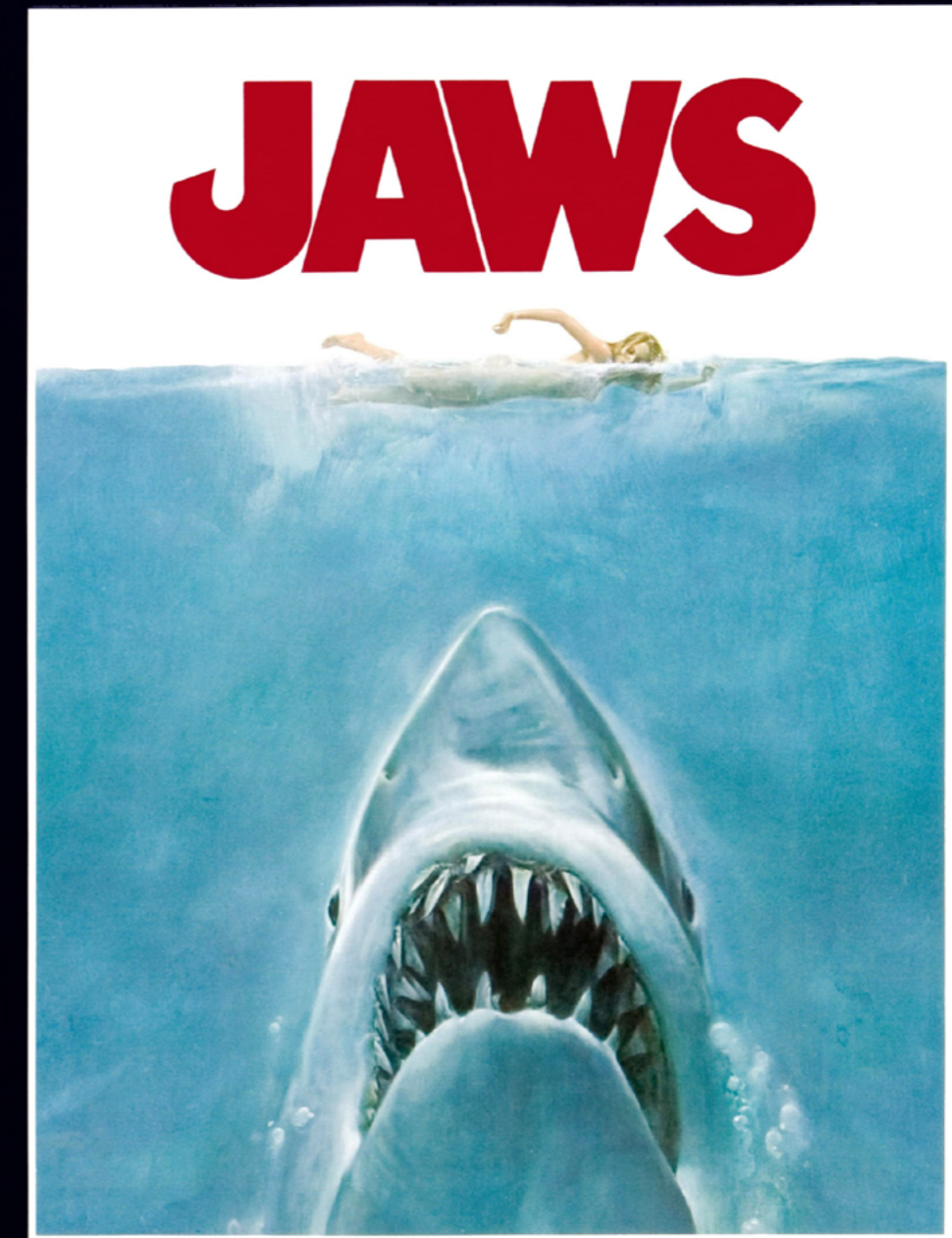
Johnson, Peter started pursuing freelance opportunities."

His experiences in Nantucket, including fishing with his father and observing the local economy, influenced his idea for two possible books about the sea. One was about modern-day pirates, and the other was about a great white shark that used a New England beachside town as its feeding grounds. She told him, "I didn't think either one was good, and to think of something else!"

"Fortunately, Peter didn't listen to me. He eventually secured a publishing deal with Doubleday for *Jaws*, which became a global phenomenon. No one had written a novel about sharks until then. At the time, most people thought that sharks like this great white were mindless killers. But, after the book was published, Peter received thousands of letters annually from readers who expressed interest in sharks, and their perceptions shifted from being afraid of them to wanting to save them from being killed unnecessarily."

The hardbound book spent 44 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list, and the paperback edition sold nine million copies. After

The terrifying motion picture from the terrifying No.1 best seller.



ROY SCHEIDER ROBERT SHAW RICHARD DREYFUSS
JAWS

Co-starring LORRAINE GARY · MURRAY HAMILTON · A ZANUCK/BROWN PRODUCTION
Screenplay by PETER BENCHLEY and CARL GOTTLIEB · Based on the novel by PETER BENCHLEY · Music by JOHN WILLIAMS
Directed by STEVEN SPIELBERG · Produced by RICHARD D. ZANUCK and DAVID BROWN · A UNIVERSAL PICTURE ·
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Silhouette of a great white shark at Guadalupe Island, Mexico (right). The book cover of the first edition of *Jaws* by Peter Benchley, published by Doubleday in 1974 (below).



ALEX GOTFRYD / WIKIMEDIA / PUBLIC DOMAIN

the movie was released in 1975, *Jaws* eventually sold more than 20 million copies, with renewed interest in it this year.

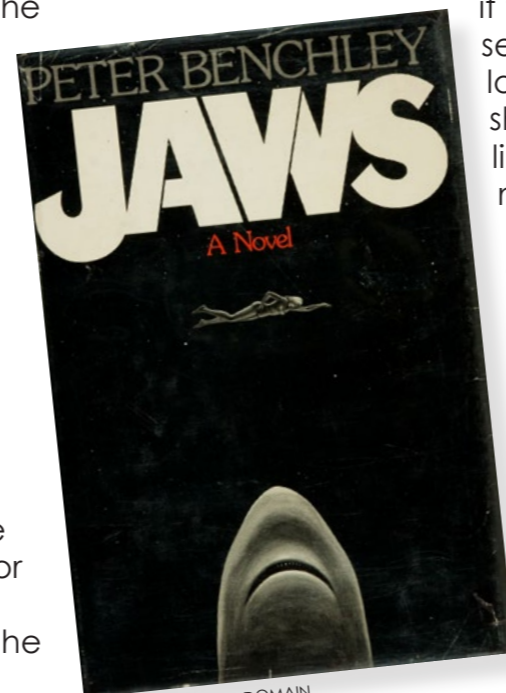
Frightening, then educating audiences

When the book was in galley form, Helen Gurley Brown, the longtime editor of *Cosmopolitan*, showed it to her husband, David Brown. He and Richard Zanuck were so excited that they became the film's producers.

They hired Steven Spielberg, a relatively unknown director at the time, after their first choice for director kept calling the shark "a whale" during their meetings. The script, co-written by Peter Benchley and Carl Gottlieb, showed how people react to public menaces that they cannot control, much like COVID-19 in recent years. Carl's focus was cranking out the daily dialogue for the actors, and Wendy thought he was terrific.

"Peter worked closely with Steven to maintain a realistically sized shark in the

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film," she said. "In the book, it was about five meters long (15 to 16ft), but Spielberg wanted it to be about seven meters long (20ft) for the shoot, so it was like a monster movie."

"Peter had a cameo as a newscaster, a la Alfred Hitchcock," she added. "Universal sent a helicopter to pick us up in Connecticut and fly us to Nantucket.

We were only at the shoot for a few weeks."

A few little-known facts about the movie

According to **IMDb**, when Police Chief Brody (Roy Scheider's character) was chumming the water and the shark popped up, he said, "We're going to need a bigger boat!" This was an ad lib, as confirmed by Gottlieb, and Spielberg loved it.

There were so many problems with "Bruce", the mechanical shark, named after Spielberg's attorney, that it was only on screen for four minutes throughout the movie. But it seemed much longer due to the editing.

When composer John Williams first played the now-iconic score for the shark for Spielberg, he said, "That's funny, John, really; but what did you really have in mind for the theme of *Jaws*?"

Global success

Wendy was astounded by the movie's worldwide acclaim. She and Peter saw the premiere in New York City with Richard Dreyfuss, who played oceanographer Matt Hooper. The entire audience gave the film a standing ovation. "Richard was so excited that he kept jumping up and down, yelling, 'We did it! It's a f***ing success!'"

Then, the producers asked the Benchleys to gather their scuba friends for a private screening, including Peter Gimble from the documentary film **Blue Water, White Death**, as well as Stan Waterman and Rod and Valerie Taylor. Their positive feedback was very reassuring to Wendy and Peter.

More importantly, audiences worldwide loved the film.

Portrait of Peter Benchley by Alex Gotfryd, on the back cover of *Jaws*





COURTESY OF WENDY BENCHLEY



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VIRGINIA BRIA

Peter and Wendy Benchley in scuba gear in the early 1970s (top left). Divers cage-diving with great white sharks in Guadalupe Island, Mexico (above). Great white shark at the surface (left).

It garnered four Oscar nominations, took home three wins (Best Sound, Best Original Dramatic Score and Best Film Editing), and earned US\$478 million worldwide, making it the top-grossing movie ever, at the time. Three sequels followed.

The success of *Jaws* led to an increased interest in sharks and environmental awareness, though it also sparked a rise in shark-hunting tournaments. Wendy noted that the experience helped educate the public about sharks and turned many into advocates for shark conservation.

Raising shark awareness

Gradually over the past 50 years, the

general public has expressed growing admiration for sharks as intelligent, sentient beings that are vulnerable and essential to healthy marine ecosystems. Wendy reflected on the issues she has worked on for 40 to 50 years, such as shark awareness, protection, conservation and environmentalism, and how her dedication to these issues, along with the dedication of thousands of others, is making things happen.

"If you look at truly protected marine areas, the biomass is amazing," she said. "It took until around the year 2000 for people to understand how important the ocean is for climate change, how much we all need to value sharks and other species,

and how we can work collectively on these issues for healthy oceans.

"In fact, 80 to 85 percent of apex predators have been decimated in recent decades, so 15 to 20 percent of the biomass is left. But so many positive things are happening now, led by NGO groups like **WildAid** and its shark conservation program."

Wendy told me that WildAid is small, agile and especially savvy. Its campaigns leverage US\$200 million in pro bono media annually. For every US\$100 donated, its marine partners turn that into US\$10,000 in free TV time, outdoor boards and web banners donated by the Chinese government. Furthermore, to



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A great white shark photographed at Guadalupe Island, Mexico

help educate the masses in China, WildAid features Asian celebrities like Yao Ming in informative **public service announcements**.

The audience is learning that up to 100 million sharks are killed each year for shark fin soup and that one-third of all shark species are now extinct. But this campaign has now helped to reduce the demand for shark fin soup in China by 85 percent.

"By 2030, scientists and governments worldwide hope to expand the ocean's marine protected areas to 30 percent," she said. "The United Nations has also been developing a treaty over the past 30 years to pro-

tect the high seas and only needs 11 more countries to ratify it."

WildAid, along with **Beneath The Waves**, the **Environmental Defense Fund** and many other non-profits, like the **Peter Benchley Ocean Awards**, are all worthy environmental causes for your donations.

Dangerous diving with sharks

In 1974, before the movie premiered, *The American Sportsman* TV program on ABC-TV reached out to Peter and Wendy about going shark cage diving. They met with Rodney Fox in South Australia because he was a consultant on

the film as a renowned shark expert who had survived an attack on his abdomen that required 462 stitches. When a rope from the cage got caught in a great white's mouth and the cage above Peter began to collapse, Wendy removed the rope while the crew kept filming.

National Geographic documentary

National Geographic recently created the documentary film **Jaws @ 50: The Definitive Inside Story**, with Wendy as an executive producer, as a tribute to the original film and the ocean's most misunderstood

predator. In it, Spielberg admitted, "We were 100 days behind schedule, the mechanical shark didn't work 80 percent of the time, and I thought I'd be fired. ... I had PTSD for years after the struggles of filming this movie because I always thought I was failing." Watch it on Disney+ and Hulu.

50th anniversary showings and exhibitions

Throughout the years, the movie's appeal on TV, VCR, cable and streaming has never waned. Now, to celebrate its 50th anniversary, Universal Studios will re-release

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shark tales



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the movie with special screenings from August 29 to 4 September 4 worldwide, including showings in 4DX and IMAX formats, plus 4K UHD home video, special events at its theme parks and more events throughout October.

In addition, the Academy Museum of Motion Pictures in Los Angeles will open "Jaws: The Exhibition" in mid-September with the first-ever retrospective of this scale, focusing exclusively on a single film.



VIRGINIA BRIA

It will feature the largest mounted presentation ever for *Jaws*, taking a deep dive into the film's production history and exploring its enduring impact. Wendy is looking forward to seeing the updated film and exhibition with her adult children and grandchildren, ensuring that another generation carries on the legacy of living in the shadow of great white sharks.

Finally, as a global ambassador and ocean advocate, Wendy spends a great deal of her time working on issues with various NGO boards. She loves this nitzy-gritty work because she can see its results in the heightened awareness of environmentalism and the growth of marine protected areas for sharks worldwide. ■ REFERENCES: IMDB, YOUTUBE

Gil Zeimer has been a PADI diver since 1985 and has authored more than 300 scuba articles, stories, blogs and newsletters that have appeared in over 25 magazines and websites, including Scuba Diving Industry Magazine, DAN Alert Diver, Scuba Diver Life, California Diving News, inDEPTH and Dive Pacific. His first book, published by Best Publishing Company, will debut this fall. He lives in San Rafael, California, USA.

Portrait of a great white shark (above) and a great white shark on the run (top right)

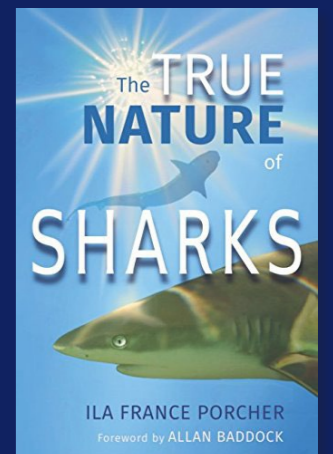
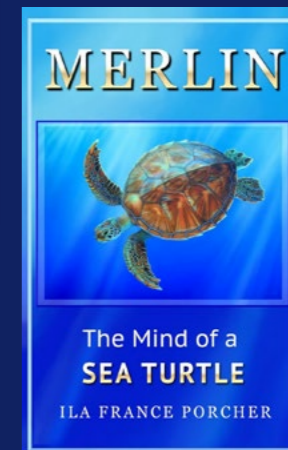
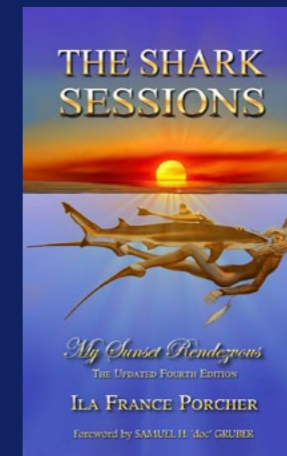


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Where Have All the Sharks Gone?

Text by Ila France Porcher

For millions of years, sharks have ruled the oceans. Sleek, powerful and perfectly adapted to their roles, they have survived mass extinctions, shifting continents and rising seas. And yet today, in many parts of the world, these ancient hunters are simply gone—vanished not just in number but in presence.

Divers who once routinely saw reef sharks now swim for hours without a

single glimpse. Entire regions of open ocean that once hosted blue sharks or hammerheads have gone strangely quiet. The question many scientists and ocean-lovers are now asking is both unsettling and urgent: Where are all the sharks going?

Sharks in decline or disappearing?

It is well known that shark populations are in decline. Overfishing, habitat destruction and the global fin trade have drastically reduced numbers in many regions. Each global study on the numbers of sharks finds a continuing decline to the point that only a few percent of pre-industrial numbers remain.



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But the mystery runs deeper than a steady drop in numbers. In some places, sharks have vanished so suddenly and thoroughly that it has taken researchers by surprise. In traditional shark hotspots—parts of the Indo-Pacific, the Caribbean, even sections of the Mediterranean—longtime observers now report vast stretches of ocean that feel eerily empty. It is not just fewer sharks. It is no sharks.

Empty reefs and silent open waters

Reefs that once bustled with blacktip and whitetip reef sharks now feel like ghost towns. Pelagic species, like silky sharks or makos, are being seen less frequently by researchers who used to encounter them regularly during tagging expeditions.

In the Red Sea, where reef shark populations were once considered stable, long-term dive operators are noticing absences that do not fit

known patterns. In parts of the Indian Ocean, shark survey stations now register days without sightings, where once they would record dozens.

Could it be a shift in behaviour or distribution? Or are sharks avoiding humans entirely? Or are we witnessing a hidden crash—one taking place mostly out of sight, in the open ocean or at unmonitored depths?

A predator in hiding?

Some scientists suspect that behavioural changes could be at play. Sharks may be altering their patterns to avoid human interaction, diving deeper or changing their routes in response to fishing pressure or rising ocean noise.

In areas with heavy spearfishing or shark culling, for example, sharks have been observed becoming more skittish—avoiding boats, divers and even baited cameras. In such cases, the sharks are still there but increasingly

invisible to us.

In other areas, warming seas may be changing where sharks go. Temperature-sensitive species may be shifting their ranges poleward, deeper or into less accessible regions. But if this is the case, we do not yet know where they have gone—or whether they are surviving there.

The dark side of data gaps

One part of the mystery lies in how little of the ocean is actually monitored. Much of what we know about sharks comes from fishery bycatch records, diver reports or tracking studies that cover small geographic areas. The vast open ocean—covering over 60 percent of Earth's surface—is not watched.

A lack of data can hide huge losses. In some regions, particularly where shark fishing is poorly regulated, entire populations may have been over-



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Ethologist Ila France Porcher, author of **The Shark Sessions** and **The True Nature of Sharks**, conducted a seven-year study of a four-species reef shark community in Tahiti and has also studied sharks in Florida with shark-encounter pioneer Jim Abernethy. Her observations, the first of their kind, have yielded valuable details about the reproductive cycles, social biology, population structure, daily behaviour patterns, roaming tendencies and cognitive abilities of sharks. Visit: ilafranceporcher.wixsite.com

REFERENCE AND FURTHER READING:
 PORCHER IF, DARVELL BW. **SHARK FISHING VS. CONSERVATION: ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS. SUSTAINABILITY.** 2022; 14(15):9548. [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.3390/SU14159548](https://doi.org/10.3390/SU14159548)



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fished into near-oblivion with no formal record. This is the case, for example, in the western Pacific, the waters off South East Asia and the Indian Ocean, where shark fishing management is almost completely absent.

Shifting baselines and the danger of forgetting

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of this mystery is what marine biologists call “shifting baseline syndrome”. As shark numbers decline, each new generation of scientists, divers and fishermen grows up with a diminished sense of what is normal.

A reef where three sharks are seen a day may seem healthy to someone who has never known the same spot to once have hosted hundreds. And if sharks continue to disappear quietly, their absence may become invisible—not because no one notices, but because no one remembers what once was.

What happens when apex predators disappear?

Sharks are not just icons of the sea. They are keystone predators vital to the balance of marine ecosystems. When sharks vanish, populations of prey species often explode, leading to overgrazed reefs, collapsing fish stocks and weakened coral resilience.

In places like Australia’s Coral Sea, researchers have found that reef health is directly tied to the presence of healthy shark populations. Without sharks to keep mid-level predators in check, entire food webs can collapse in a cascade known as trophic downgrading.

Can we bring them back?

There is still hope. In places where shark protections have been enforced—such as the Bahamas Shark Sanctuary or around Palmyra Atoll—populations have stabilised or even begun to recover. Some no-take zones have seen shark numbers re-

bound within a decade.

But the deeper mystery remains: How many populations are already past the tipping point, and how many sharks are now surviving only in fragmented communities, disconnected from their traditional ranges?

The urgency is clear. We cannot save what we cannot see—and we may not realise what has been lost until it is too late.

A vanishing presence

For now, the ocean holds its secrets. Perhaps the sharks are still out there, deeper, farther or quieter than before. Or perhaps they are vanishing in the spaces where few are looking—one reef, one trench, one empty pelagic blue at a time.

We often imagine the ocean as full of mystery. But sometimes, the most haunting mystery is what is no longer there. ■



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