

Tigers of the Night

-By Chris Hartzell

Like most working shark divers and photographers, I have to labor long and hard to save up enough money to travel. So when I decide to spend a good chunk of change on a trip, I make sure to pick it right. With places like Hawaii, Galapagos, Farallones, and Guadalupe Island, the next target was set on the lure of sharks and big animals at Socorro Islands. But having good friends can always make a difference...or a change...and good friend Joe Romeiro with 333 Productions did just that. An hour on the phone with him diverted the attention to the Tigers of Tiger Beach in the Bahamas. Before I knew it, what was way down on the list of places to go soon had the money for Socorro being spent on airline tickets to Florida for 6 days aboard Jim Abernathy's *Shearwater* boat.

A bad group of divers can ruin the best of itineraries and locations, so it was thrilling when we arrived to find Joe had arranged a close-knit group of friends on this trip that included some star cast members like Robert Cantrall, Dos Winkel, and the famous shark handler Cristina Zenato. The *Shearwater* was just as fun to be aboard and although it seemed small at first, it grew into a great vessel to be on and I equate it to camping at sea. I would definitely entertain another trip aboard. The staff rounded out the overall great experience and by the end of the trip it was impossible not to think of them all as good friends.

With shark-finning becoming one of the largest global ecological disasters in history, people are reaching out into their world and discovering what was previously an air of fear surrounding them is

actually a world filled with mystery and beauty. With shark diving becoming one of the fastest growing eco-tourist attractions, Tiger Beach is one of those areas where humans and former "man-eaters" reliably come face to face. An internet search for Tiger Shark pictures will yield thousands of results with a majority of those pictures originating in this famed location hours off the Bahamas. But one thing you won't see



among those results are a lot of pictures of Tiger Sharks at night. Night diving with Tigers is relatively new and can be a challenge to be successful, let alone successful with photo and video. The conditions to get it right must have numerous uncontrollable factors that fall into alignment and have the proper addition of technical help. I was incredibly lucky to experience such an 'alignment' event.

The night came post-brilliant sunset and the water laid down despite the cloudy skies and mild winds. The bait crates were out all day with almost a dozen Tigers regularly discovering there was no profit to their belly behind the smell of fish. With previous trips by the crew yielding a couple brief night encounters with 1 or 2 curious individuals, we were rather pessimistic that the Tigers would waste their time with us at night knowing their lack of success in previous hours. But our hopes overrode the odds as we geared up under the overhead



deck light. The Lemon Sharks circled the surface light as we stepped to the water's edge. As we plunged in one by one and sank to the bottom, the streams of light shot out from the numerous flashlights. At 20 feet deep, the water around us out to 40 feet was lit up with a luminous green glow by the boat's lighting, giving a feel of being in a large Vegas hotel pool illuminated by the neon lights of 'the strip'.

The Lemons flew in and out of the circle of light on aimless courses. Their lighter underbellies



were heavily darkened by shadows from the overhead light. But those shadows disappeared suddenly...KAPPOW! "What the hell is that?!" was the look on all our faces as it appeared there was a Cadillac driving down from the surface. Suddenly in the green glow of the pool, Joe and his trial Gates video 'headlights' shot massive beams through the water, lighting everything with beautiful clean blue-white light. It became a surreal experience as perfectly lit and colorful sharks floated through the

ethereal green pool. The visibility was better than 50 feet when we started seeing the large ghosts mixed in with the smaller Lemons. Their white bellies with stripes reflected Joe's lights well when we

realized the Lemons, and us, were not alone. First one, then two Tigers slowly came into view. They cruised the mid-water making tighter circles around the bait. Suddenly behind us, 3, 4. Our heads were now on a swivel and it was becoming "Tiger madness" as the crew would call it. Pointing to Tigers was key to safety for everyone, and as I took a moment to look around, I realized everyone was pointing in a different



direction. Wait...everyone? There are 6 of us down here. I made a scan...1, 2, 3, 4, 5...and yes, 6! This is

beyond “madness”! Among the 30 Lemons were 6 Tiger Sharks cruising the darkness. They came in from every direction on a constant schedule and it was difficult to stay focused on just one. The strobes were firing left and right and the video footage was rolling endlessly through the group.

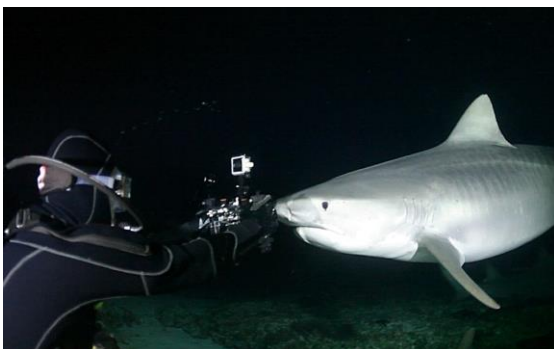
But the experience was just about to peak for me. Throughout the previous days diving, I was getting a reputation for getting in Tiger’s way. Sure enough, this night wouldn’t be complete without an



epic night-bump. As my camera rolled on 3 Tigers simultaneously, I saw a large 12 foot Tiger advertising a predicted path. She was nosing the sand about 10 feet away in a direction to my left. On my knees, I sidled over a few feet just in time to have her spot me and raise her massive head to my lens. As she gave an investigative look at me, a small bump with the lens dome on her nose peaked her curiosity and she turned her head one way, then the next, to get a good look at me with both eyes. Although her mouth was large enough to fit my entire Canon G12 Ikelite housing inside her mouth, she instead

stood still in front of me as she seemed much more puzzled at why I was not moving out of her way. Finally, after just a couple seconds, which felt like minutes, she turned away and slowly rose up and away into the blackness.

There was no lightning in the sky, but that night on the boat there was electricity racing through everyone about the rare and mystical experience that had just occurred. Whatever the reason for such activity may never be known, but trips before and after ours have not yet had another similar experience. The alignment of weather, the ocean, the animals, and Joe driving his underwater ‘Caddy’, yielded a spectacular lifetime event I feel gifted to have experienced...a bump in the darkness of the night I spent with 6 Tigers in the Bahamas.



Chris gets bumped, compliments of Dean Machado

Chris Hartzell works as a Fire Captain in Monterey, California where he uses his worldwide traveling experience to offer local wildlife tours, photography lessons, and creates one-of-a-kind artwork. You can see more about him and his unique work at PhotoStrokes.net.