

Shark Attack!...a very lucky young man.

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I spent a very pleasant few days at the Trident Dive Resort, on an island near Manado, owned by a good friend of mine. His young son, Petrus, who guides his father's guests on diving trips, told me a tale, in a matter-of-fact manner, that had me riveted to my seat, with my glass of Bintang evaporating, unheeded beside me. I have used his own words mostly, with a few adjectives, and exclamation marks! thrown in to embellish the feelings that the narrator conveyed, in a conversational manner, but which seem rather flat on paper. Here is his story:

We sailed to Biao Island in the WINDSONG with 12 Italians as guests. We dived near the Pinnacles, on the East coast of the island, a good place to see big fish. I guided one group of six divers, Benny the others. The two groups separated along the reef, a near vertical wall. My group turned out to be competent divers, and after I showed them a good spot for photography, I decided to leave them to check on Benny's group, as he was then very new to the job of Divemaster.

I swam back along the reef in a depth of 30m. Below and further out I noticed a very large shark...a Mako!...in about 60 metres. I knew my group would want to see this animal, so I banged on my tank with my knife to attract their attention. In the distance I could just see bubbles rising from behind an outcrop on the coral wall. I swam back towards them, banging my tank continuously.

I looked down at the shark. He was still deep, cruising in the same direction as me, therefore offering the divers a good opportunity for photos, if only he could be enticed to come up into shallower water where the light would be better. I wished the group would respond to my signals...they might miss the shark! I knew that such a metallic sound travels well in water, so I felt sure they could hear me. I did some more banging and at last I could see some Italian heads rising in their bubbles from behind the coral. I felt very pleased with my efforts to entertain my guests.

When I next looked for the shark, I could not see him at first. Then I spied him directly behind me, at the same depth as me now, and swimming slowly along...towards my guests! I felt a surge of elation that I had managed to "lead" the shark towards the group! At least two of them were clearly visible now, and I made the classic sign for "big shark!", hand shaped like a fin on my forehead, arms wide to indicate the size. I turned around to point out the animal for them.

Now he was closer, much closer, and acting strangely! His tail was thrashing from side to side, and so was his head, but all this apparent energy was going nowhere, he appeared to be stopped in the water. This was curious behaviour, something I had not seen before.

My divers all seemed to be hanging in space, about 25 metres away...why were they not showing any interest? I banged my tank vigorously again, and turned to point unmistakably at the Mako. Now, to my surprise, he was swimming vigorously, with that fast jerky motion all fish use, usually when they are escaping from danger...but this fish was moving straight towards me! I could see his jaw was slightly open, with a row of jagged teeth visible. I felt somewhat surprised.

As the shark closed in to a few metres, his black eyes rolled back out of sight and became white discs. He turned on one side, and to my consternation his jaw dropped wide open! He appeared to be contemplating an attack on me!

In fright I half turned my back towards those jaws just as they crunched against me with a heavy bang. I felt myself being pushed through the water and rotated through half a circle while I could feel part of me ripping under the impact of those dreadful teeth. I attempted feebly to push the heavy body away from me, and felt my palms and fingers grating on the rough surface.

I next saw the shark circling slowly between me and the other divers, who seemed to be frozen in mid-water, even their bubbles seemed to have stopped rising. I felt that the relaxed action of the shark indicated he was no longer interested in me, and I tried to feel for my wounds, terrified that I had been ripped open. I groped cautiously under my buoyancy jacket, around my side and stomach where the shark had hit me. I could feel no parts of me missing, and no sharp pain. There was no ominous red stain in the water. I slowly became aware that my tank was flapping with my movements, that my jacket was loose, and frayed. The shark's teeth had torn only the fabric of my jacket! I was unharmed!...after a serious attack by a large Mako shark! I could not wait to tell all my diving buddies...!

My euphoria was short lived. The enemy was still circling, and now heading straight back towards me, ignoring the Italians. In the attack, the Mako had pushed me some metres out from the coral wall, out into the blue. If he were to attack again, I knew I stood a better chance if I could huddle against the wall. I finned desperately towards a slight, vertical groove, beside a giant yellow sponge. My fast movements seemed to trigger an instant acceleration of the animal into that same jerky motion of the first attack. Oh no!..there was to be a second indeed!

I reached the coral groove with just enough time to try to curl up in the hollow...and in time to see that most terrifying sight: the black eyes rolling back, the great jaw springing open, pink mottled with black inside, ragged teeth in rows...gaping to scoop me off the wall!

He passed very close, so close I could feel the rush of water from his fins, and so close I tried, instinctively, to push the abrasive body away. Some part of the shark, perhaps his pectoral fin, brushed against me, but thank God those dreadful teeth passed by without touching me. My closeness to the rock had prevented him from getting near enough to get those jaws around me.

The shark now dived away, deep down the slope. I inspected my abraded hands, fearing the scent of blood might excite the animal into a further attack. They were red but there was no visible bleeding. I had survived no less than two attacks by a Mako shark!

Thankfully, I started to phrase my opening announcement to my incredulous friends back in Manado.

I looked down again. Now I saw that my persecutor had turned back, and was now charging vertically up my groove, seriously intent upon scooping me out of it! His jaw was slightly open again, with teeth in evidence, in a ghastly grin of triumph!

I had been frightened before, but now the clear horror of my likely fate came flooding through my body from my racing heart. This remorseless predator had not been deterred by his lack of success, he would keep coming back to the attack until he would carry me in his jaws down and away, ripped and bleeding in a red cloud staining the blue of the depths.

In this new pounding terror I lunged for a handhold on the yellow sponge and yanked myself a little further into the recess, tucking my legs, the parts nearest the shark,

underneath me. After the customary display of open jaws he slammed into me with stunning force, and I knew my end had come. I was blinded by dust and numbed by the impact, but I could feel myself being dragged by the remorseless jaws down into the deep. The water cleared, as did my eyes, and I could see I was being dragged rapidly down the cliff. Through the narrow angle of my mask, I could see no sign of the shark...surely he must have me gripped in his teeth...from behind on my right side, where a great weight seemed to press against me! I felt I should be composing some farewell message, some prayer perhaps, but my mind was numb, although my eyes continued to take in the rush of the water past me and my attacker down the darkening cliff. The pain was now unbearable, especially in my head, and I put both hands to my ears in instinctive reaction. Now I suddenly stopped being dragged down, and now I saw a great yellow object detach itself from my side and go tumbling down away from me. It was the great sponge, and I had just let go my desperate hold on it! In the same photographic frame, as it were, I could see the shape of the Mako swimming leisurely away, ever downwards, overtaken quickly by the tumbling sponge. I was no longer in his jaws!

This revelation should have produced yet another surge of relief, but in truth I was so exhausted, from loss of blood presumably, and in so much pain that I knew that I was dying, despite having been spat out by my attacker. I should have struggled to save myself in some way, but the will was ebbing away, along with my blood.

I became conscious that I was upside down, but slowly rotating to an upright position. As I became upright, my mind, my eyes cleared somewhat and my first clear sight was the shark, swimming rapidly towards me ...again! I froze in renewed terror, not having the energy to turn to flee towards the dark wall, nor even to turn my back against his attack. Time seemed to trickle slowly by, as I watched that same sequence of attack movements, all in slow motion this time. All I could do was to cringe mentally against the impact. But worse was to come. Before the Mako hit me, I managed to turn slightly away, and noticed, out of the side of my mask, another creature in vigorous, agitated motion ...another shark, drawn to my blood, was attacking me from behind!. This multiple attack seemed even more sinister, more ghastly! The Mako, still in slow motion had approached almost to my hopelessly outstretched arm, when his jaw closed abruptly and he turned away. The other shark, however came flailing its fins past me...it was a diver! it was Louisa, the Italian lady, making great circular movements with one arm, generating a great vortex of bubbles from her spare mouthpiece in her hand. She had come to my rescue! A glimmer of hope started to grow, and with it time seemed to click back into normal.

We both watched the retreating shark for a few moments, and then I felt a strong grip on my shoulder. Louisa turned me to face her. She made the "Are you OK?" sign several times, insistently, in my face. I could make no reply, could she not see my injuries? My whole body was in pain, especially my head. Louisa grabbed both my shoulders and attempted to fin vigorously upwards. I could see she was making no progress, we must be very deep now....

My diving training reasserted itself. Louisa was endangering herself at this depth by trying to drag my inert weight up...my inert weight, including my substantial weightbelt...my weightbelt! ..my training urged me to reach down to release it, and immediately I felt the return of hope and energy. Firstly I felt lighter, and Louisa's efforts

started to have effect. Secondly, in unbuckling my belt, my fingers had close contact with my stomach, which actually felt quite good...I slowly realized that my injuries, at least down there, were not serious...and look!...there was no blood in the water. I was not bleeding profusely, as I had feared. Thirdly, the pain in my head had decreased slightly...of course, my eardrums!...they had been under severe, increasing pressure as I fell down the slope attached to my sponge. I reached for my nose, and cleared my ears and sinuses in a great, squeaking rush, and suddenly I was in no great pain at all! I gave a shaky OK sign to Louisa, and started finning upwards myself. With both of us more relaxed, we looked all around, below, and above us towards the silver surface. Except for a small knot of divers way above looking down anxiously we seemed alone in our blue void, certainly there were no attacking sharks! Louisa took my hand in hers as we floated gently up. Never has human warmth felt so welcome! Afterwards I asked her why she risked great danger to come to my rescue, while her companions quite understandably watched horrified from a safe distance? She replied, "My mother's instinct made me do it!"...although to me she seemed very little older than me!

After Petrus had finished his graphic tale, we discussed together what might have been done to avoid, or protect against, such a dangerous predator as a 4-5 metre Mako Shark, Isurus sp.. Firstly, we agreed that continuous banging on his tank probably attracted the animal in the first place...after all, such a trick is used by photographers to attract less dangerous species of sharks.

Secondly, the shark's move upwards to directly behind Petrus should have been warning enough to desist in playing games with a wild animal...this was a signal of professional interest.

Most definitely the agitated movements side to side of the shark's head indicated a deliberate sampling of the scents left in Petrus' wake, a classic sign of further interest in potential prey.

Every possible defensive measure should have been taken at this point. Such a move might have been to swim directly towards the animal, making circles of bubbles with a spare mouthpiece, as Louisa did, very bravely and astutely, and which almost certainly deflected the last attack, the lethal coup de grace. Most shark species seem spooked by apparently aggressive action, although we must be very careful in reading the mind of such an rare, alien, unfamiliar killer as Isurus.

A useful alternative would have been to slip out of buoyancy jacket and tank, keeping the mouthpiece in place, and and to hold the tank towards the shark. This would have placed a hard, unappetising object between the jaws and Petrus' soft parts, and would have helped deflect heavy shark and lighter diver away from each other after the moment of impact.

Finding what shelter was available on the reef wall was an obvious and important measure in case the aggressive defence had not worked.

Virtually no one else has survived unscathed no less than four determined attacks by such a top predator.

We also agreed that Petrus was a very lucky young man!