

"Ten years ago a survey was conducted to establish which word had the greatest impact on the largest number of people. Researchers tested words like rape, murder, sex, love, snake, poison. To their surprise, the word shark aroused the public's emotions more than any other."

Great Shark Stories

June 1998: I thrashed around in a steel cage with great trepidation. As typical shark voyeur, I had devoured shark documentaries, rented *Jaws* too many times, and occasionally hallucinated at the beach (...and pool). Eventually I took my fascination further-South Africa, the Cape, serious shark country. Stepping off into a flimsy cage reinforced with garden hose, thrashed by the icy Benguela current from the South Pole, I wondered if my fetish would ensure my death.

Twenty-four years before me, four Americans had booked a diving vacation to Port Lincoln, Australia. For four thousand dollars each the package included oxygen, boat trips to Dangerous Reef, cages, and a strip of professionally-chummed ocean. Submerged in the cage, they focused through horse blood and viscera, awaiting the great white shark: "Three sharks came... They must have wondered what kind of creature this wall of black eyes looking at them belonged to. Every pass heralded excited cries and a dozen clicking cameras. Never was a shark so photographed."

I doubt it's coincidental that *Jaws* debuted only a few months before the first tourists paid for their cage in Australia. Without showing too much physical shark, the film sparked shark-mania. The public wanted to see more of a supposedly ruthless and mindless villain. Operators benefitted from this excitement by charging a fee for choreographing a gaze into the shark's domain. In a way, the development of shark-cage tourism marked a sea change: for the first time people were seeking-out the animal that had been avoided for centuries. Sharks' unique relationship to mankind drove the fascination: unlike other sea life, large sharks refuse containment in aquariums. An eye-to-eye confrontation demands entering their environment. Sharks force humans into the zoo-cage, just to survive a glimpse.

One might call this the problem of "shark access." Virtual solutions abound. American audiences can watch the latest voluntary ventures into shark-infested waters on the Discovery Channel's Shark Week, an annual event for armchair shark tourists. An hour-long documentary details the biology of sharks' olfactory system, complete with a tour inside the gel-filled sensory pores of the snout. After the science comes the Shark Attack Files. Put aside dry experts pontificating about the highly-evolved detection of minute voltages (useful for homing in on prey); now witness doctors exhibiting photographs of bloodied near-corpses. Spear