

Bahamas Shark Diving



In May 1996, I accompanied Norbert Wu, a professional underwater photographer, on a shark photography trip for three diving days to Walker's Cay, where I functioned as a camera assistant. Walker's Cay is the outermost island and one of the smallest in the Abaco

chain of the Bahamas. It is one of the northernmost islands of the Bahamas. Walker's Cay is 45 minutes from Ft Lauderdale airport and is 100 acres in size.



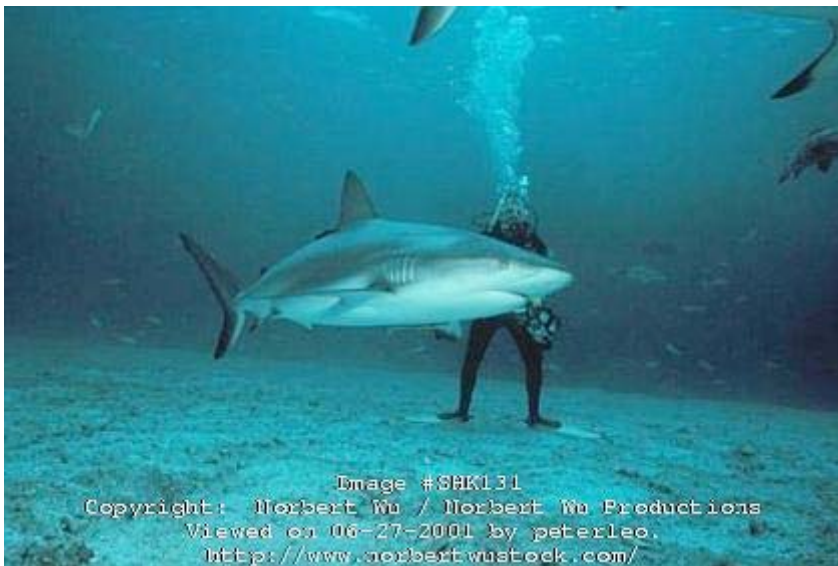
A prominent feature of Walker's Cay diving is the shark dive which they call a **Shark Rodeo**. The Shark Rodeo site is at 35 feet with 50+ vis. Sportfishing trimmings (large fish heads, tails, etc) are frozen in a trashcan with a rebar tree inside. This becomes a fish popsicle, a *chumsicle*. First the boat circles around the

target spot a bit to call in the sharks. Then you drop down and stay stationary on the bottom grouped together. The chumsicle is dropped overboard and anchored 10-15 feet off the bottom. You can see it in the upper left of this photo. Then you are free to swim around or over the chumsicle (never getting too close of course). You don't have to stay stationary during the feeding period and this is what I particularly found outstanding.



Sharks swarm in for this chumsicle. I counted 40-70 sharks on each shark rodeo dive. The sharks were predominately Caribbean reef sharks in the 4-6 foot range with mostly 6 footers. I don't know Caribbean sharks so I could be wrong about what I was seeing. The sharks were classically beautiful in shark form and coloration; I never tired of looking at

them. Many sharks have remoras and some are tagged for a shark population study. There were also a few 6 foot nurse sharks around. Large groupers were attracted as well as small fleets of snappers and jacks. The sharks swam in circles around the chumsicle and went in and out from it.



Usually there would be one or two sharks chomping on the chumsicle every few seconds. It was radical to see a six foot Carib reef shark or nurse shark chomp on that chumsicle. The jaw extended and the shark twisted and shook to get a piece off. If it got a big piece, it would shoot off fast and several sharks and jacks would

hightail it after that shark to get a piece. One shark with some food in mouth came fast right towards me with several sharks and jacks in hot pursuit. The divemasters clang on their tanks to warn divers of this shark equivalent of a solar flare and I simply rose off the bottom 5 feet and let the sharks run by under me. Incredible! I didn't want to experiment holding my ground though I am sure they would have veered around me.



I and the other divers stayed in the chumsicle's orbital area where the sharks were constantly circling around and swimming in and out. The sharks paid no attention to us other than casually veer around us to avoid running into us. It was an electric thrill at Walker's Cay to see a six-footer extend its jaws and twist and turn to rip off a chunk. I was very close to

the sharks the whole time, close enough to touch. Big six foot Carib reef sharks cruised by right next to me. It was very safe since one stayed out of the immediate area of the chumsicle where a shark would view you as a competitor for the food. The large groupers stood off a bit and liked to park themselves right in front of you and watch for food bits (if you remained stationary on the bottom). You can see two near me in this photo. The groupers were literally in my lap as I was kneeling on the bottom. I reached out and stroked several; they didn't care since they were focused on food. The groupers didn't have much chance to feed since the competition was tough; I saw a grouper with fresh shark toothmarks cut into its back.

You could swim over the top of the chumsicle and look down and see a swirling fleet of sharks with some chomping at the chumsicle. Very impressive and visually exciting. Sitting there in the midst with 40-70 sharks circling about in front of you, behind you, above you, alongside you is an amazing visual spectacle. Since there was rebar in the chumsicle which can break off a few shark teeth, one could scrounge for shark teeth in the coral scabble bottom after the chumsicle was pulled from the water.

Our non-shark feeding dives were spectacular reef dives. We went to Magic Kingdom Reef at 43 foot depth with 100 foot vis. The coral reefs on the Walker's Cay dives were typified by this dive. The reef is very old and towers

above the sandy bottom; the reef top is 10-15 feet higher than the sand channels. Therefore there are walls to look over as well as the top of the reef. This was classically beautiful reef diving with white coral sand channels running amidst a towering coral reef: a lot of topography. You could go inside the reef very easily; there were numerous caves and long tunnels wending their way through the towering reef structure. It was visually spectacular to see twinkling light shafts coming down into the tunnels and caves that I swam through under the reef. Since the general diving area for Walker's Cay is located off one end of the island, the reef dives are in the general area of the shark dives with the result that one almost always sees a few sharks cruising about during one's reef dive. This is quite a bonus as anyone who has done reef diving in the Caribbean can tell you; sharks are usually seldom seen. Another reef dive was to a site called White Hole which was excellent for towering reefs and probably prettier than Magic Kingdom and just as good for passages under the reef. Over the several reef dives, some of the interesting sightings I had in addition to Caribbean reef sharks cruising about were: conch, trumpet fish, anemones, and face-to-face with small Red Hind groupers. We also did a wreck dive in 85 feet; visibility was 100+ feet. The wreck was one year old with minor growth and was leaning at 45 degree angle. It looked very picturesque with the great vis as I dropped down to it. We left the wreck and swam along the reef upslope. The reef had deep clefts which one could swim down into. I saw lots of reefy sealife including a huge sea turtle, an eel, lobster, a big parrot fish with an attached remora.

One afternoon after the dive, we walked over to a sandy strip beach on Walker's Cay for some snorkeling. It may not seem like much when you first approach it but it was a great snorkel spot with an unusual attraction. There were fleets of large and small barracuda cruising along at the eight foot depth just off the beach, looking for small fish to eat. It was a lot of fun snorkeling amidst these barracuda. The bottom was covered with sea grasses and amidst the grass were LOTS of the Cassiopea jellyfish ! They blend in very well and you may not even realize they are there unless you look closely. Cassiopea lives upside down on the bottom farming algae in its tentacles and it looked like the sea grasses a lot. These jellyfish have frilly and larger blade-like tentacles with a green coloration due to the algae they farm and they constantly pulse downward

so that they are flat against the bottom. We naively thought they didn't sting so I brought some up for photography. Oh, do they sting! They shed nematocysts so you get covered with stings over your arms and anything downcurrent: chest (armpits are especially sensitive I found), neck, face and lips. It only hurts for 15 minutes and isn't too outrageous in the pain department. It reminded me of getting stung all over by some unseen nematocysts in the current at Cabo Pulmo, Baja California on a wind-chopped day. We came back the next day with gloves and wetsuits and had excellent viewing and photographic opportunities with these jellyfish. It was fun to pick them off the bottom, get them swimming around, and look closely at them; just don't do it in front of your face when you are downcurrent from them !

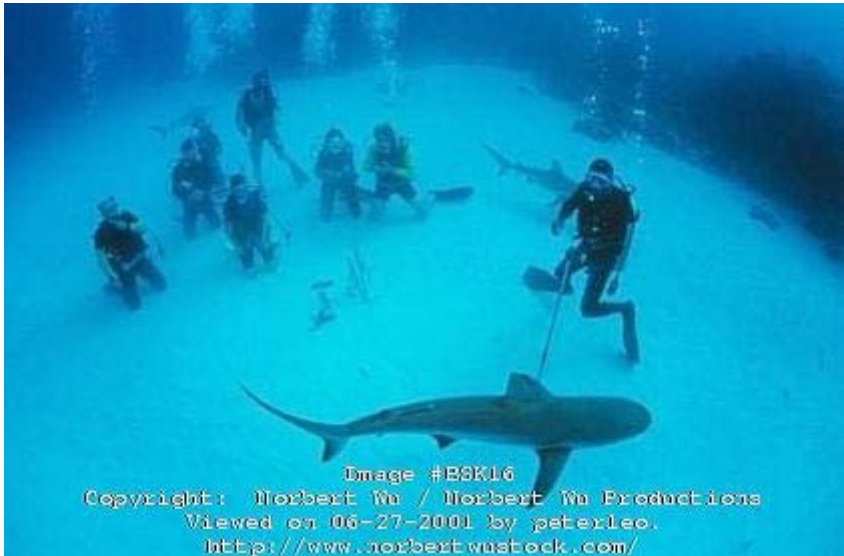
The spelling bee champions among you may well be asking "Hey, shouldn't Cassiopea be spelled Cassiopeia?" It is if spelled correctly but the Cassipea jellyfish name was spelled that way when the jellyfish genus was first described in the scientific taxonomic literature. Since it was reported that way, it has to be used that way. However you may well see that scientists and books incorrectly spelling it Cassiopeia. I researched this and here's the first description of the Cassiopea genus: Peron & Lesueur, 1809. Annales de Museum d'Histoire Naturelle (Paris), Volume 14:356-357.

Stuart Cove's



In May 1996, I accompanied Norbert Wu to Stuart Cove's on New Providence Island (which has Nassau, the capital city of the Bahamas). Stuart Cove runs a quality dive operation that is very large as dive operations go. Stuart Cove's is located next door to the South Ocean Golf and

Beach Resort, and every morning we strolled over to Stuart Cove's for a day of diving. Stuart Cove's is a pretty impressive operation. The staff were pretty friendly and though the dive operation was large, it had a great amiable atmosphere. Here's the Web site: stuartcove.com



How was the diving?
Excellent and with a lot of variety. A main event at Stuart Cove's is the shark dive. They go to a regular shark dive spot 35 minutes out. Sharks are accustomed to feeding and can be seen throughout this area even on non-feeding dives. Divers drop down to a bottom of 35 feet or so (visibility

underwater was 60-80 foot) and settle on the bottom in an open circle about 25 feet in diameter. The shark-feeding divemaster brings down a crate of chum chunks and settles in the middle of everyone. This attracts 10 - 15 sharks, all 4 - 6 foot Caribbean reef sharks. A few very large groupers also come in for the feeding; the groupers here were much larger than the ones I saw at Walkers Cay.



The sharks swarm in and out amongst the spectating divers, heading for the shark-feeding divemaster, and swirl around him. He pulls out chunks on a barbless spear and feeds individual sharks as they swarm about him. He is wearing chainmail sleeves and gloves so he doesn't get chewed up

himself. You see the shark open its mouth and chomp it down. I saw a large remora choke down a large chunk of chum that had been torn off by the shark to which it was attached; that remora really had to work to get that large piece down its throat. The sharks have to get to the shark-feeding divemaster by swimming next to you or over you so you are extremely close to the sharks. I would be watching the feeding and notice that the light overhead suddenly got darker. Look up and there is a 6 foot Caribbean reef shark passing over my head only a foot above my head. The sharks also passed alongside me on their way in and out with many as close as 1 to 1 1/2 feet; it was awesome to see them this close. I would see one on my left and right simultaneously!



You saw the sharks a bit closer here than at Walker's Cay. At Walker's Cay, the sharks had room to maneuver and an opportunity to veer around you at a distance of their choosing. Here at the Stuart Cove's shark feeding, the sharks had to swim right next to you or over you to get to the food. Since there was a ring of

spectating divers, the sharks had to move through that ring or swim over your heads. The dive felt very safe since you are not located at the food source but at a short distance. At Stuart Cove's, you saw them chomp down chum chunks, swarm around the shark-feeding divemaster (and you), and in the process you got physically very close to the sharks. You see some very large groupers go mano-to-mano competing with sharks for access to food. The groupers were actually scarier to see in their feeding behavior than the sharks. The sharks cruise through the Stuart Cove's feeding process. The groupers really go for it and charge in quickly at the hint of an feeding opportunity since the shark-feeding divemaster doesn't want to feed them (since we are there to see sharks feed).

Non-shark feeding dives at Stuart Cove's were great; the reef dives were wall dives or flat reef dives. At a dive spot called the Ridge, we did an 80 foot dive along the top of a steeply sloping wall of coral. Sightings included large isopod parasites on damselfish, garden eels in the sand flats and large triggerfish positioned at a cleaning station being serviced by wrasses. We did a wreck dive at 60 feet called Bahama Mama, the name of the ship which you can still see painted on the stern. My wreck sightings included blue-striped shrimp in anemones, a large grouper photogenically cruising around the wreck, and a large red/white barber shrimp in the wreck's wheelhouse. Several non-feeding dives were at the Shark Wall in the general area of the feeding. There was a steeply sloping coral wall with flat reef on top with sandy spots, jawfish and their houses in the sandy spots, and groupers and sharks cruising around. Like Walker's Cay, if you did diving in the general feeding area, you saw sharks even if there was no feeding underway. At a dive spot called the Runway, with 100 foot vis, we saw sharks and large groupers about, a large moray eel, and garden eels in the sand. At a dive spot called Tunnel Wall, there was a wall with deep clefts and numerous small caves and tunnels; it was fun to explore them. Coral was stacked like plates on this wall. Sightings included two juvenile spotted drum fish, arrow crab, a big crab with long legs like a spider crab, and a flamingo tongue snail. An interesting dive was at a deepwater buoy called AUTEK; this was far offshore on the Tongue of the Ocean. There were three 3 foot silky sharks and jacks hanging around under this very large buoy. The divemaster fed baitfish to the silky sharks; they were very hungry/curious and would come right up to you to see if you had food. He would grab one by the tail and give it a twist which would immobilize the shark. He would flip it over and hold it in his hands for you to stroke the silky shark. Awesome. Since we were over deepwater, the ocean was full of pelagic drifting gelatinous species. There was a fleet of small brown jellyfish drifting by and I saw salps, ctenophores and a large transparent, flat-worm-like ctenophore. This buoy is where the oarfish was photographed by Brian Skerry that appeared in several magazines. I would like to go back again and again to that buoy increase my odds of seeing pelagics.

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