

# ROBERT AND THE SHARKS

»I DISCOVER FINNED SHARKS AGAIN AND AGAIN. ESPECIALLY ON THE POORER ISLANDS IN THE TROPICAL ZONES. »A CHINESE GUY COMES ONCE A WEEK AND PICKS UP THE FINS«, THEY TOLD ME«







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STILLS FROM THE MOVIE »PACIFIC HORROR«. HERE, ROBERT SUPPORTED THE DOLPHIN PRESERVATIONIST STEFAN AUSTERMÜHLE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST THE SLAUGHTER OF DOLPHINS IN PERU, WHICH ARE USED AS SHARK BAIT



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AS A STUDENT, ROBERT M. LEHMANN MANAGED EUROPE'S LARGEST AQUARIUM. BUT HE TURNED HIS BACK ON HOLDING ANIMALS IN CAPTIVITY AND IS NOW SHOWING THE BEAUTY OF FREE NATURE THROUGH HIS WORK. BUT ALSO ITS DESTRUCTION BY THE HUMAN KIND.

Because of them, I became a marine biologist and they have fascinated me until this very day. When I was six years old, my dad brought me a book about sharks from his travels – and from this day forward, there was no animal that was more exciting and beautiful for me. One thing was for sure: I wanted to become a shark researcher. A visit to the aquarium or a dive with a shark wasn't necessary – a simple book with 20 pages sufficed. I saw my first real shark on my very first dive: an angel shark off Fuerteventura. I was 19 years old.

Today, 15 years later, there are countless books about sharks on my bookshelf and I have gone on many shark dives in all the world's oceans. But unfortunately, I was also confronted with sharks on land, or at least with parts of these animals.

When I first heard about the finning of sharks, I was determined to do something against it. I have documented this practice all around the globe and today I give lectures about the topic, write articles or make movies about this cruel procedure. I think about

it everyday. I'd much rather dive with sharks every day though.

Rob Stewart, who recently passed tragically, was a real role model in all of this and a great inspiration on my journey. Ultimately, I even have a tattoo of the cover image of his movie Sharkwater on my stomach.

In retrospect, a lot has happened in shark protection during the last 20 years. A lot of positive things, but also a lot of negative things. Sharks have been decriminalized through documentaries, but are also subjectively and negatively portrayed as monsters and supersharks in shark weeks on TV. Some countries have understood how important sharks are for a healthy ecosystem and have put them under protection. Micronesia and the Maldives for example. Not so long ago, this was unthinkable. Today, a few countries have prohibited finning, some airlines don't transport shark fins as a matter of principle anymore and restaurants have taken shark fin soup off their menus. Petitions, massive pressure from social media and the educational work of volunteers have made the biggest impact here. ➤



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IT IS VERY RARE THAT THINGS HAPPENING BETWEEN 1 AM AND 5 AM ARE LEGAL ...



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IT'S ALMOST NEVER ABOUT THE FLESH OF THE SHARKS. IT'S ALL ABOUT THE FINS FOR THE SHARK FIN SOUP



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DUSKY DOLPHINS ARE THE PREFERRED SHARK BAIT OF FISHERMAN IN PERU. UP UNTIL NOW, AROUND 15.000 DOLPHINS PER YEAR HAVE BEEN KILLED FOR THIS VERY REASON.



THE »FEATHER«, A HARPOON HEAD TO CATCH DOLPHINS AS BAIT FOR THE SHARKS

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**BABY HAMMERHEADS ARE SOLD AS A TRADITIONAL DISH IN PERU. FOR THAT REASON, THE POPULATION AND ALSO THE YOUNG ANIMALS ARE MERCILESSLY OVERFISHED**



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I have also tried to make a city shark free. Then, it was all about the belly flaps of the mud sharks. In the city, 14 fisherman sold this product. Belly flaps have proven to be heavily contaminated with pollutants and the population of mud sharks is ruthlessly overfished. So basically, you're selling unhealthy products and eradicate an animal species along the way. For me, that didn't make much sense and so I embarked on my mission – which failed terribly. The fishermen were totally unimpressed with the test results of the Toxicological Institute as well as the sharply decreasing number of sharks. They earn 5000 Euros a month with the belly flaps. You don't just give up on that. Especially not for the wellbeing of the customers or even perhaps for the sharks. One of many setbacks on my journey towards shark protection.

This generation won't change, I understand that today. But I make regular visits to schools all over Germany and tell the kids all about sharks and their role in the ecosystem. I am sure that none of these kids will ever eat a shark fin soup after hearing my lecture. Many of them want to become animal researchers or marine biologists afterwards.

This is the more useful and more sustainable way to encourage people to think differently and to sensitize them to the importance of sharks on our planet.

Children understand in a matter of minutes what's important out there and are very eager to change and do something. I start kind of an environmental fire at the schools, which usually continues to burn for a long time or which might be the initial spark to start a diving career. That's such a lot of fun.

Over the course of these minutes I can sometimes forget what I have seen when working undercover at fish markets in Peru, in

the harbors of the Azores or the islands of Papua New Guinea ...

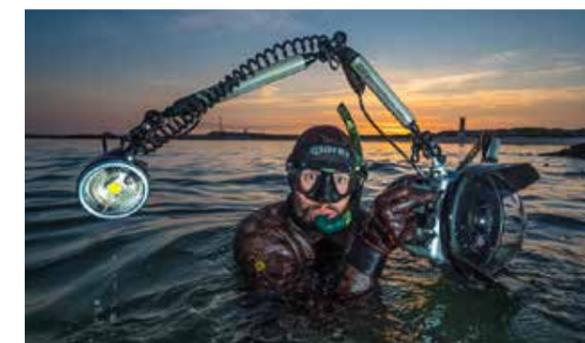
I am excited especially about divers and underwater photographers who participate and engage in the protection of these animals. After all – and not entirely selfless – we want to keep marveling at these graceful predators for many years and also continue to dive with them.

We're going into the right direction when it comes to shark protection, but there's still a lot of work to do. And when the sharks die, the oceans and us humans will die with them eventually.

I get asked a lot why I am doing all of this. Then I always think, »Why aren't you?«

Taking photos of sharks is always exciting. Every shark has its own character. Some are careful, some are wild and some are only super curious. Even within the same species, sharks are very different. That's what I like most. It's always a different experience with them underwater. But every time, it's beautiful ...

At this point, I'd love to share with you some of my most beautiful shark pictures, but I don't want to deprive you of the horrifying moments on land. ■



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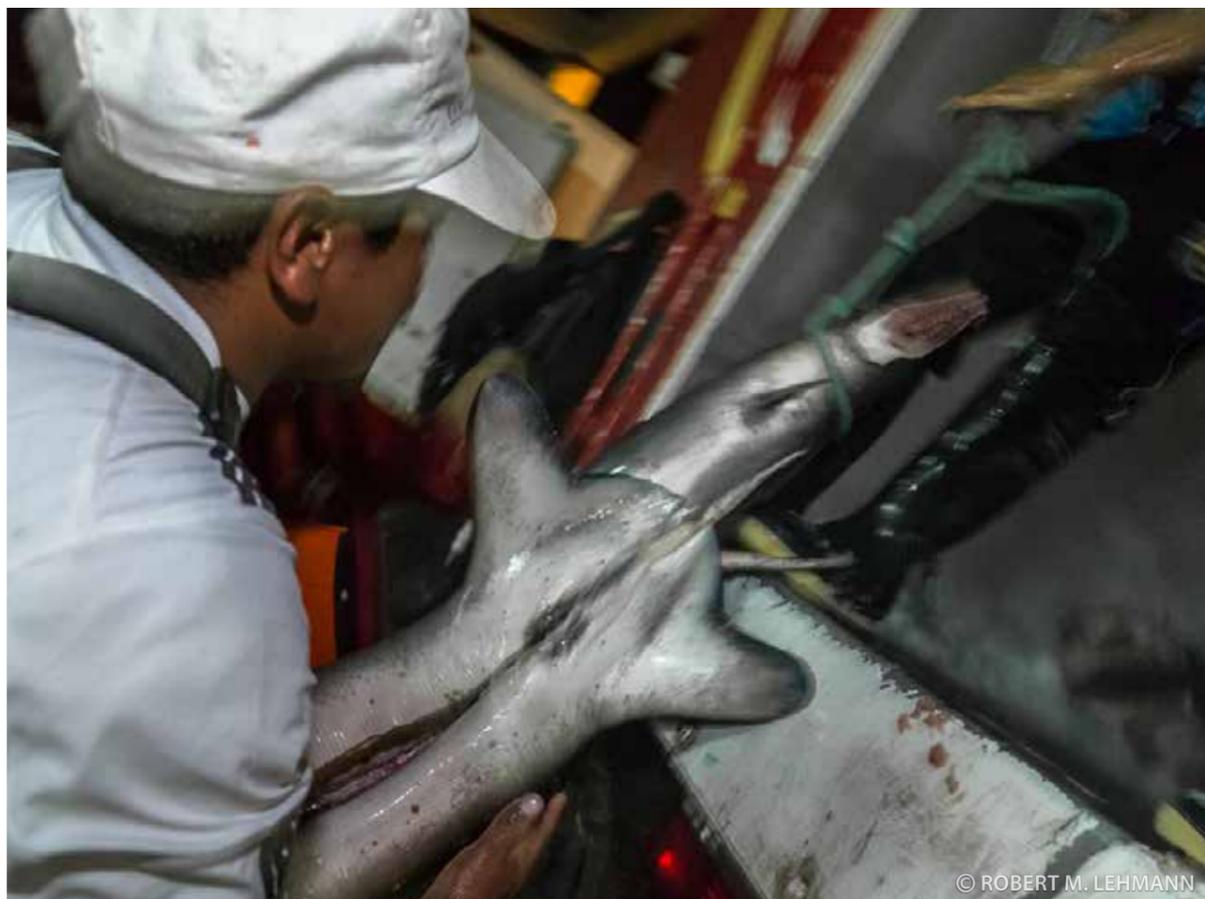
IN LIMA, PERU, THOUSANDS OF SHARKS ARE BEING LOADED. FREQUENTLY, THERE ARE MORE FINS THAN SHARKS THEY BELONG TO



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SOMETIMES ROBERT ALSO CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE. A NIGHT WITH THOUSANDS OF KILLED SHARKS CLEARLY LEFT ITS MARKS



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