

## **FLYING SHARKS – PREFACE**

Very few people know what actually happens behind the acrylic panels of a large public aquarium. How do we move the animals from the wild ocean to the exhibit tanks, where they swim continuously, mesmerizing the visitors on the other side of the glass. Transporting live sharks and other large marine creatures around the world involves months of careful planning and implementing minute details that range from government permits to species-specific animal behavior; the use of pharmaceuticals to elaborate calculations on water filtration; including catering, veterinary care, and what type of wood to use on a tank lid. My company, Flying Sharks, is one of only five operations in the world that provide these unique services and more. My colleagues and I, all trained marine biologists, are responsible for organizing exciting live animal collecting and transport trips that has had us traveling from Cape Town to Frankfurt, Vancouver to Amsterdam, Key Marathon to Valencia, Bahia de los Angeles to Monterey, Dubai to Turkey and many other somewhat unusual destinations.

I'm a firm believer of bringing the sea inside and teaching people that the fish behind the aquarium window are more than just there for their entertainment. In that moment when the human gaze meets the eyes of a fascinating deep-sea creature lies an opportunity to foster a brand new way of relating to rare animals that they would otherwise never encounter (unless they scuba dive). Yes, the moment and the experience is a personal one but the way it resonates within the viewer and the wonder it evokes, especially if the beholder is a child, holds out immense hope of a better future for the shark or ray gliding through the water. The family who visits the aquarium today, and what they learn there, seeds the possibilities of active conservation for tomorrow.

It's my belief that the more one keeps critical issues of the marine environment very visible on the personal and on the world stage, the better chance we have of understanding how and why we must sustain marine animals and care deeply for the welfare of the seas--as a global obligation. Running my collections and consulting company, adequately named "Flying Sharks", and dedicating part of my time to educating undergraduate and graduate Marine Biology students is my form of advocacy for ocean life. I hope this book contributes further to that commitment. How it came about is one of those out-of-the-blue stories.

At the beginning, over a cup of coffee, I explained to my agent, a fine gent named Peter Prescott, (whom I first met at a scientific meeting), what I did for a living. I mentioned that on the majority of my collection trips I always kept a journal and was religious about writing in it. Believe me, the work I do is not without its hazards. Whatever can go wrong usually *does* go wrong, sometimes on a grand catastrophic scale! My team and I do everything humanly possible to protect our live animals in the transport process. However, the sheer physical logistics of collecting and shipping them has its challenges, and the color of such events, both positive and negative, I usually logged in my journal. Peter was intrigued by this chronicle and believed he had stumbled on the raw material for a book.

We agreed that, if well written, my adventures in capturing and flying fragile marine creatures from oceans to aquaria was an interesting enough theme to engage a broad reading public. We realized that the stories I had to tell (some already written at that point) were just that: stories. What could link and put them in context? They are now ordered as tales that depict the coming of age of a (only sometimes) fearless marine conservationist, with the added spice of marine biology lore, insider international brokerage deals, and astounding tales and tribulations of transporting ungainly wild animals across great distances.

*Flying Sharks* is a book filled with tales of bravery and stupidity, stamina and silliness, good decisions and choices with “Fail!” written all over them. In these pages, you will hear about the time when my Australian boss and I were in Northern France hopelessly tangled inside a net with a very upset female 8 ft. long Sandbar shark. Or, when a cargo DC10 aircraft crashed in South America because the pallets were not secured properly; the very same aircraft (and pallet loading crew) our team was to board a few days after the disaster. . And of a time in Miami, when a forklift driver drove his machine straight through a fish tank with Eagle rays swimming inside and reversed, with water still dripping from the forks, screaming “It wasn't me!!” This book also features some quasi-nakedness for the frisky reader, as a semi-sedated Sandtiger shark in a tank I was working in suddenly woke up and ripped my shorts to shreds, while a local news crew captured the awkward moment on National TV. These are just a few of the colorful stories that I (barely) survived after 17 years in the public aquarium industry.

While there are touches in the chapters that tend to explain the scientific side, as if this were a marine biology manual (which it isn't), the book remains a direct account, an informal conversation between the reader and a sea-obsessed adventurer who is scarred from shark bites (his fault) in the process of his unwavering devotion to marine creatures. Just as John Steinbeck's *“The Log from the Sea of Cortez”* is written in a journalistic or memoir style, my own account speaks directly of the intrepid voyages taken by a guy who catches sharks (and other fish) and flies them to public sea-world attractions around the planet. The tales presented here come with a good measure of daring-do and offer unique revelations on a mostly hidden way of life behind the scenes at major aquaria across the globe.

As for me, despite this being a book devoted to my many adventures collecting sharks and other marine species from the oceans and delivering them to worldwide aquaria, I was born a landlocked Portuguese in the small town of Cartaxo in the District of Santarém.

I wish I could claim descent from a proud line of Iberian mariners, stalwart deep-sea fishermen or colonial explorers but my ancestry is of the ordinary and the provincial. However, like many people in my country, I have a deep and abiding affinity with the sea, an historic and remarkable native passion that once made Portugal pretty much an Ocean Empire from 1415 onwards to well into the previous century.

Such cultural influences touch one's spirit irrevocably—the sea and its citizens lit a fire in me at a very young age—one that still burns brightly, and that heated my enthusiasm for this book. The ensuing chapters are the result of my continuing relationship with the world beneath the waves and its unique inhabitants.

I was a nerdy kid who particularly liked animal life: lions, giraffes, elephants, horses, crocodiles and, eventually... sharks. My passion for sharks and their related species was fueled by countless trips with my family to SeaWorld and other similar aquaria around the globe. And, of course, the first time I watched “Jaws”, I was in my teen years and already deeply infatuated with these “Silent hunters of the deep”, which is the subtitle of Ron and Valery Taylor's shark “bible” that has rested on my nightstand for 25+ years now. Hooper, the researcher in the movie, played by Richard Dreyfuss, defined in a crystal-clear fashion what I wanted to do when I grew up and I committed to it with every nerve in my body.

I graduated with a degree in Marine Biology from the University of the Algarve, in 1994. A month later, I had my first job at the Lisbon Zoo. While there, I became curator of two Sandtiger Sharks that swam in a small temporary exhibit. However, “Curator” is too grand of a

word for someone who spent his days removing shark poop from a tank, but who still managed to get some scientific research done. While scraping excrements from the gravel, I would carefully retrieve and separate teeth shed by the sharks to study them and would later publish my findings on the state of the dentition and the story it told.

My data was to become one of the first scientific papers correlating changes in metabolism of captive animals with environmental variables such as temperature. Since then I've worked continuously in the fields of marine biology and conservation, and possess an unusual knack for quick thinking and sensible troubleshooting (if I do say so myself)—talents that got me promoted to curator of collections at the Oceanário de Lisboa, shortly after I started working there in 1997.

During my time at the Lisbon aquarium, I served as head-diver, collections manager, drummer in the aquarium's band, overall funny guy, and became a very frequent flyer, much to the dismay of my fellow supervisors, who saw me continuously walk in and out of the water and airplanes. I'm extremely social and enjoy talking, and like to believe that I have some talent doing it, so I delivered (and still do) dozens of lectures at scientific meetings, where I share my ideas (the good and the really bad ones) with my peers. A scientist at heart, I believe in education and disseminating knowledge, which is the main reason why I publish much of my research on the world of captive and fisheries biology.

In 2009, I concluded my Ph.D. work on commercial shark and ray fisheries in Portugal. This thesis is now the most comprehensive document to date compiled on the subject. It is my sincere hope that my data contributes effectively towards the protection of these amazing animals in Portuguese waters, where not only are they severely over-fished, but they also suffer horrendous mutilations due to the collection of their fins, hacked off while they're alive.

I've certainly done all I can to bring them to the eyes of the millions of visitors that wander through international aquaria every year. My efforts have always been made in close cooperation with marketing and educational departments, and strictly aimed at better educating a grossly misinformed public.

\*\*\*\*\*