

### Chapter 3 Baja California and the Sea of Cortez

I think I was a Mexican in another life. I have a strangely powerful attraction for Mexico and all things Latin. The attraction is particularly strong for that part of Mexico known as Baja California. Perhaps it was just proximity; I grew up in the Los Angeles area, less than 200 miles from the Mexican border. I can't remember exactly how I got interested in Baja (the other life, maybe?) but I started going to Tijuana shortly after high school. I am uncomfortable admitting this, but one of the initial attractions I had to Latin culture was bullfighting. I was a huge Hemingway fan and "*Death in the Afternoon*" was a strong influence. The Latin pageantry, the whole spectacle of the Tijuana "*Bullring by the Sea*" grabbed me—but eventually the brutality and cruelty of the "*corrida*" outweighed the fun parts of the afternoon and I lost interest. I do remember loving the cultural shock of crossing the border, the mostly friendly chaos of the Tijuana streets, the drive out Calle Segunda to Playas de Tijuana, the colors, the smells of the mesquite fires. It was amazing that everything could be that different by just passing a few feet over some imaginary line. It was an attraction for me that would last a lifetime.

I made my first trip to the southern part of the peninsula in the late 1960s. It was a fishing trip to the classic "east cape" resort Rancho Buena Vista. On that trip we flew commercially to La Paz, and then took an air taxi flight in a high-wing single (I think it was a Cessna 206 or 207) from La Paz airport to the dirt strip at Buena Vista. The experience was literally life-changing for me—flying in a small airplane, landing on a dirt strip, the first taste of the Sea of Cortez where the desert just **became** ocean—the whole "Baja experience" back when it was still young, simple, and pristine. Back then Cabo San Lucas was a dusty little village. When I got back I started collecting and reading everything I could find on Baja California. I went crazy over Ray Cannon's classic book "*The Sea of Cortez*." Baja would become a major part of my life and experience for the next 40 years; it remains so today.

I learned to fly in the early 1970s and earned my private pilot's license in 1973. Within a year I had my instrument and multiengine ratings. Baja influenced my decision to take flying lessons. I knew flying would open up my access to the peninsula, making everything easier to get to and in much less time. In 20 years of flying I eventually logged over 1,700 hours, flying a wide variety of single-engine airplanes (Cessna 150, 152, 172, 177, 182, 210, Beechcraft Bonanzas F33, V35 and A36) and several multiengine airplanes (Beechcraft Travelair and Duchess, Piper Aztec.) In 1979 I bought a beautiful 1963 Beechcraft Baron, and in the next ten years logged over 1,000 hours in it, more than half of my total time. The Baron was like a family member.

My four kids kind of grew up in Baja. They loved Baja and the Mexicans loved them. The kids all thought they were Mexican...eventually that had to be explained. There were several places we particularly enjoyed and visited often—Hotel Punta Pescadero on the "east cape" near the southern end of the peninsula, Meling Ranch in the mountains north of San Quintin, and the cities of Loreto and La Paz.



*Beautiful Hotel Punta Pescadero, site of many hermit crab races*

But our favorite place was Punta San Francisquito, “PFQ” for short, a small basic Sea of Cortez resort about halfway down the peninsula on what must be one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. With a difficult drive on marginal dirt roads it is accessible by land (we have driven in several times in recent years) but it is known primarily as a “fly-in” place. We made over 100 flying trips there from the mid 70s to the mid 90s. We would make it down to San Francisquito for long weekends at least once a month in the summers. We could be there in less than 4 hours from Van Nuys airport, where I kept the Baron. Driving takes two full days. We kept a locker there, with two inflatable boats, scuba tanks, a small compressor, and an ungodly stash of fishing, diving, snorkeling and other beach, camping, and kid gear.

For five or six years in the early to mid 80s one of the San Francisquito employees was a magnetic, good-looking young Mexican kid named Savino. At one time I am sure I knew his last name, now I can’t remember it and I can’t find it in any of my notes. He was probably in his early twenties when we first met him. Our kids really liked him. Savino did everything, he was a master mechanic, fixed everything that needed fixing, and he was a decent bartender (although I don’t think I ever saw him do any cooking.) But his main skill was as a world-class fisherman. He handled the pangas with great skill, and he knew where to find the fish. He could approach a boiling school of yellowtail from just the right angle and stop at just the right point without disturbing them. When there was no action on the surface he generally knew where to find them down deep. Even when we kept our own little fleet of two inflatable boats there, we would still often go out with Savino in one of the PFQ pangas, because he was such a good fisherman and so much fun to be with. Most of our memorable stories from San Francisquito seem to involve Savino.



*Short final, landing to the north in Baron 30SD, Punta San Francisquito*



*Punta San Francisquito looking north*



*Punta San Francisquito looking south*



*Punta San Francisquito looking north at the cabanas*



*Morning at Punta San Francisquito*



*My beautiful Baron 30SD tied down at Punta San Francisquito*

One afternoon at PFQ we saw a huge cloud of birds working several miles out off the north point, maybe a third of the way to Isla San Lorenzo. The birds were too far for the inflatables, so we roused Savino from the bar and headed out in one of the PFQ pangas. When we got to the boil it was amazing; the ocean was exploding. Every imaginable marine animal was there eating—shoals of small fish were blasting out of the water, birds were wheeling and shrieking above and in the water, and the yellowtail were so thick you could walk on them. Hundreds of dolphins were breaking the surface, graceful thresher sharks were launching themselves completely out of the water, and even a pod of pilot whales was there. It was late summer and the presence of dolphins on the surface suggested yellowfin tuna below, so we dropped the jigs down below the yellowtail, and were immediately rewarded with four heavy hookups. When the first tuna showed color, we realized with horror that we were without a gaff. That was no big problem with the first three fish; they were in the 20-25 pound class and, with some effort, could be “bounced” into the boat with just the rod. Not so with the last one, that fourth fish was big.

The big fish was being fought by a close friend, now gone, Frank Armellini. When we saw the fish we knew it would be a problem, we estimated his weight at about 70 pounds. Frank worked him carefully and after a forty-five minute struggle the big fish was on his side next to the panga. There was no possibility of “bouncing” a fish that big without breaking the line; he had to be hauled in with bare human hands. I heroically volunteered to do it. The aft body of a yellowfin tuna, even a big one like this, narrows to a relatively small diameter just forward of the sharply forked tail. With this fish it was about the diameter of the skinny end of a baseball bat. That allows a fairly decent two-handed grip. I figured that would be better for hauling him in than by grabbing him by the gills, because the gill covers have sharp edges and don't offer as good a grip as the tail. All that was good logic, but I forgot to take one thing into consideration, buoyancy. Hundreds of years ago a real smart guy named Archimedes discovered that an object in water is acted on by an upward force equal to the weight of the water it displaces. Since the density of the tuna was about the same as the water, he was virtually weightless when he was completely submerged. So it was easy to get some of him out of the water, but the more of him that came out of the water the heavier he got. When I had half of him out of the water, I was lifting damn near 40 pounds. So I found myself in this crazy rocking cycle with the fish—leaning over the gunnels of the panga I would pick up as much weight as I could, the panga would tilt over to my side as the weight increased, and each time I reached my strength limit the tuna would slip back into the water. We did several cycles like this. I just couldn't lift him over the side. I was getting harassed and ridiculed, of course, by the other laughing occupants of the panga, and this didn't help my temperament. Finally I managed to squeeze out a great shot of adrenaline, and with one mighty heave, I hauled him over the side. In doing that I of course fell over backwards and the fish, now rested, landed on top of me and started thrashing. It was quite a scene, me on my back embracing this wildly gyrating yellowfin tuna. Lures, poles, beer, oars, tackle boxes, shoes, hats, and people scattered in all directions. But after all that work I was not to be denied. The fish finally calmed down and I was able to roll it off of me and into the bottom of the panga. And after this incredible selfless effort, can you believe I was subjected to even more laughter and ridicule. But the battle was won. The great fish weighed 75 pounds and made magnificent sashimi. None of us, including Savino, ever again forgot a gaff.

My dear friend Jim Bailey and I kept two inflatable boats there in a locker. Both were Metzeler, superb pieces of German equipment, one a twelve footer called (by Metzeler) a “*Maya*,” and a bigger one, a sixteen footer called, appropriately, the “*Elefant*.” Our drill, after

coming back in from fishing or diving or whatever we were doing on the water that day, was to haul the boats up on the beach to a point well above the high tide line where it would remain overnight. One afternoon we hauled the bigger boat, the *Elefant*, up to a point which we thought was safe, and proceeded with the evening festivities. In the morning the boat was gone. We had substantially underestimated an extreme high tide, and sometime during the night, the water reached the boat, and the *Elefant* floated away. The morning was beautiful, warm and clear with virtually unlimited visibility, the sea was brilliant blue and dead calm, and there was no *Elefant* in sight. Frank Armellini was flying the smallest airplane that trip, a Cessna 172, he had plenty of fuel (none was available then at PFQ), and so Frank volunteered to do an aerial search for the boat. We talked to Savino who felt, based on his knowledge of the currents, that it would most likely have drifted to the south. So Frank took off in the 172 and headed south; it didn't take him long to find our *Elefant*. It was drifting about five miles offshore and, amazingly, about ten miles south of where it had started, sometime in the night. Frank spotted the location of the boat using landmarks on the coast, and headed back. Savino fired up the panga and Bailey and I headed for our drifting, crewless boat. It was right where Frank said it would be, and Bailey and I boarded it to bring it home. Savino waited until the engine, a Johnson 25 hp, lit off, and then both boats headed back north to PFQ. On the way back we passed huge boils of yellowtail working on the surface, and since we still had fishing tackle on board, managed to land a few for the day's ceviche. Our haul-out protocol changed that day; from that point on we tethered the boats to the center pole of a palapa so they wouldn't ever again wander away in the night.

Savino spoke very little English, about the same as we spoke Spanish. In reality our Spanish was probably a little better than his English. But we clearly communicated. He would often join us in the late evenings when his work was done, in front of our cabana. With the fire almost out, after everybody had eaten and drank and most of the guests and staff were asleep, we would lie on the sand contemplating cosmic things, and finish off the beer or the tequila. We would look at the stars and babble away in some half-Spanish, half-English form of marginally spoken language. It didn't matter too much what was said or understood, it was just fun to have him around. One night he started telling me and Bailey about his greatest dream, to buy a panga of his own, take it to Bahia de Los Angeles, and be an independent fishing guide up there. But he lamented that he would probably never have enough money to buy a panga of his own. I remembered all this, and wishing him well in his quest for a panga, just before I fell asleep. After I fell asleep Bailey continued wishing him well, and those wishes included asking him how much a panga might cost. About US \$2,000, Savino replied. Bailey, kind, emotional, and generous soul that he is, told Savino that he and I ("I" being now sound asleep) would be glad to give him the money to buy the panga. Savino was overcome with gratitude; he just couldn't believe our generosity. Neither could I, when in the morning Bailey sheepishly informed me that I owed Savino \$1,000. Hearing the whole story, how could I refuse? After all, Bailey told me that Savino offered us both free fishing for life. What a deal! It would save us thousands in the long run. So that morning we each wrote Savino a check for \$1,000. Mine came back, cleared through an Ensenada bank, in my bank statement about 4 months later, covered with magnificent flowing endorsements, signed by at least 10 Mexican bank officials and with several American bank stamps.

It was not a good investment, and the story, so full of promise, has a sad ending. Savino did eventually go to Bahia de Los Angeles, but he never bought the panga. He used the money for something else. Others who knew him in Bahia told me he got involved with

drugs. Eventually he got in trouble with the police and ended up in jail, for a long time, in Ensenada. What a waste of a beautiful young life.

I stopped flying in the early 90s. The reason I stopped flying is that my airplane, my beautiful Baron, was destroyed in a bizarre accident in 1989. It's one of those "good news/bad news" things. The bad news is that my airplane was destroyed. The good news is that nobody was in it at the time. My only aviation accident in 20 years of flying occurred when the plane was on the ground, and I was about 50 miles away. It happened during an air show at Van Nuys Airport (VNY) in July of 1989.

I kept the Baron in one of those metal T-hangars at a place called Execuflite (formerly Bell Helicopter) at Van Nuys on the east side of the airport close to where Sherman Way passes under the runways, for those of you who are familiar with VNY. During the big air show, which Van Nuys hosts every summer, a pilot was taking three people at a time for a ride around the pattern in his four-seat Piper Turbo Arrow. He charged the passengers a fee for this, which was donated to the "Ninety-Niners," a famous women's flying club. It was like what used to be called "barnstorming." After making numerous trips around the patch throughout the day, he made one last fateful trip with three generations of passengers on board, a woman, her son, and her father. Astonishingly, the pilot ran out of gas on takeoff. That's right, on takeoff. Nobody runs out of gas on takeoff, but this guy did. With a large field and golf course right in front of him, the Arrow pilot decided to try a difficult procedure called a "180." Rather than putting it down straight ahead, he executed a 180-degree turn, without power, to try and make it back to the runway from which he took off. For a variety of reasons, this maneuver is rarely successful, and this one was no exception. Before he hit the ground he flew through my hangar. In passing through both sides of the hangar, he took off about 4 feet of my vertical stabilizer (the vertical part of the tail), bent my fuselage about 30 degrees, and lost both of his wings and horizontal stabilizers (the horizontal parts of the tail.) Amazingly, his bare fuselage came through the far side of my hanger in a vertical position without any spinning or cartwheeling, which undoubtedly saved all four lives on board. He skidded on his belly another 300 feet or so, bashing into a classic old Army T-6 trainer, which he also destroyed before coming to a stop. All of them lived although there were some serious injuries.

I found out about it on the 11-o'clock news. Just before going to bed that night, Pam and I were watching the TV news, and on came a story about an accident at the big Van Nuys air show. Somebody had destroyed an airplane and a hangar on the ground trying to make it back to the runway after an engine failure on takeoff. The view they showed on the tube looked suspiciously like what I see looking straight out in front of my hangar. Scared now, I called the Execuflite number but got only their voicemail. After a restless night, I called again early in the morning and got a human, who said, yes, Mr. Bondy, I'm sorry to tell you it was your hangar and your airplane. Pam and I immediately headed for the airport to survey the damage. It was horrible. I was struck by the fact that there was no fire. I carefully inspected the two Arrow wings lying just outside the wreckage of my hangar my, both wing tanks completely dry and with no smell of gas fumes. He clearly ran out of gas.

In the months following the accident I had many negotiations with the Arrow pilot's insurance company. Obviously there was no question about who was at fault. Evaluating all my options, I decided to take a cash payoff rather than trying to repair the airplane. Everyone told me not to try to repair an airplane that badly damaged; it would "never fly right." Also, I was only flying the Baron about 50 hours a year at that time, and I didn't think

that was enough to stay current in a complicated twin-engine airplane. I would take the payoff, and look around for a nice single to buy, maybe a Cessna 182, a good, tough, reliable airplane which would do well in Baja. Unfortunately, because of all the aircraft litigation in the 80s, none of the “big three” manufacturers (Cessna, Beechcraft, Piper) were making single-engine piston airplanes anymore. The price of used singles thus skyrocketed. It was not a good time to be buying a used single-engine piston airplane. I rented a nice 182 at a fixed-base operator at Van Nuys for awhile, but eventually I stopped flying. I think my interest in diving and underwater photography had a lot to do with that. The last PIC (pilot-in-command) entry in my log was on July 30, 1993, when I did three touch-and-go’s and one full-stop landing, my last, in the rented Cessna 182 (N1818A.) I miss flying terribly. It was a huge part of my life for 20 years. The memories come flooding back every time I see a small airport, or hear the sound of a small airplane overhead. Or see a Baron.

The trips to Baja continued by land. Now our Baja travels are in Big Red, our H1 Hummer:



*Coleen and Jesse with Big Red, pre-flames*



*Jesse with Big Red, post-flames*

The Mexicans love the big red Hummer, particularly with the flames. At the military checkpoints along the Transpeninsular Highway they always try, I think in jest, to trade their drab green ones for mine. Once they offered two of theirs for mine. I probably should have considered that more carefully before politely rejecting it. The soldiers at these checkpoints have always treated us with courtesy and friendliness. Here a group of them pose in front of Big Red, fully armed, with Jesse:



*Big Red meets the Mexican Army*



*On the road between San Felipe and Gonzaga Bay*

I snorkeled many times on the beautiful reef right in front of Hotel Punta Pescadero, but my first dives on scuba in the Sea of Cortez were at San Francisquito. My introduction to liveaboard boat diving was in the Sea of Cortez in the mid 1980s, on the fantastic old Baja Explorador, one of the world's first liveaboard dive boats. I made three trips on the Explorador before it went to dive boat heaven. The Explorador dived the southern islands and seamounts from La Paz Bay up to Isla Catalan, just south of Loreto. The Explorador introduced me to all of the magical southern Sea of Cortez sites—the sea lion colony at Los Islotes, the famous El Bajo seamount, and the incredible pinnacle just off the north end of Isla San Jose with the wonderful name, Las Animas (The Spirits), one of the world's greatest dive sites. It was at Las Animas that I first saw the unforgettable spectacle of schooling hammerhead sharks. I have seen it many times now in other places, but there's something about that first time that I will never forget.

Whale sharks are the world's largest fish. A true shark, they reach lengths of over 50 feet. Every diver wants to see one. Filter feeders, they eat only plankton. How odd, the largest fish in the ocean eats only the smallest animals in the ocean. After two liveaboard trips on which whale sharks were seen by every diver except me (once in the Red Sea, once at Cocos Island in Costa Rica), I figured that it just might not be in the cards for me to see one. Then I discovered, by coincidence, that there is a regular population of whale sharks every summer in Bahia de Los Angeles.

With a little research I found that the whale sharks are generally in the bay from about July through December, with the best months being September and October. I also learned that the best base for our whale shark operation appeared to be a place called Camp Gecko, an eclectic collection of buildings and campsites a few miles south of the main part of Bahia de Los Angeles.



*Camp Gecko, Bahia de Los Angeles*

Camp Gecko is owned by a fascinating man named Abraham Vazquez (or just “Doc).” A trained and fully licensed medical doctor, “Doc” is a Baja legend. The Mexican government requires that newly graduated medical doctors serve an “internship” in some of the less-developed parts of Mexico. It’s kind of similar to mandatory military service. Doc got assigned to Bahia de Los Angeles, fell in love with it, and never left. Along with his medical skills he has a keen understanding and empathy for the marine life in the bay, particularly the whale sharks. He bought land and developed the popular Camp Gecko campground, from which he runs guided trips to see the sharks on one of several boats he owns and operates. So with that fund of knowledge, I arranged my first trip in search of the world’s biggest fish in September of 2002 along with my son Jesse and my good friends Jim Bailey and Armando (Mando) Regalado.

Bright and early on our first morning at Gecko we boarded Doc’s boat ***Gecko III*** and headed for the south part of the bay and a place called El Rincón, where most of the sharks hung out feeding on the plankton-rich water. Finding the sharks was easy, the water was glassy and their big dorsal fins were clearly visible as they cruised easily on the surface.



*Whale shark on the surface*

They could be approached easily from the boat and it was thrilling to look down on them as they slowly swam alongside us.



*Whale shark, Bahia de Los Angeles*

But it was even more thrilling to slip over the side and see them in the water:



*Whale shark, Bahía de Los Angeles*



*Whale shark, Bahía de Los Angeles*

I did another whale shark trip two years later in 2004 with similar great results. This time we used the services of guide Joel Prieto in his comfortable center-console panga:



*Joel Prieto, Bahía de Los Angeles guide*

Joel gave us a great trip and I can't say enough good things about him and our second successful quest for these amazing big animals. It was an incredible experience swimming with whale sharks, and I am glad I have finally seen them.



*Whale shark, Bahía de Los Angeles*

Jacques Cousteau called the Sea of Cortez “the world’s aquarium” because of its rich fish life. I know that’s a little hokey, but it has basis. The variety and abundance of fish life is truly extraordinary:



*Big fish need little fish*



*School of small fish at Los Islotes*

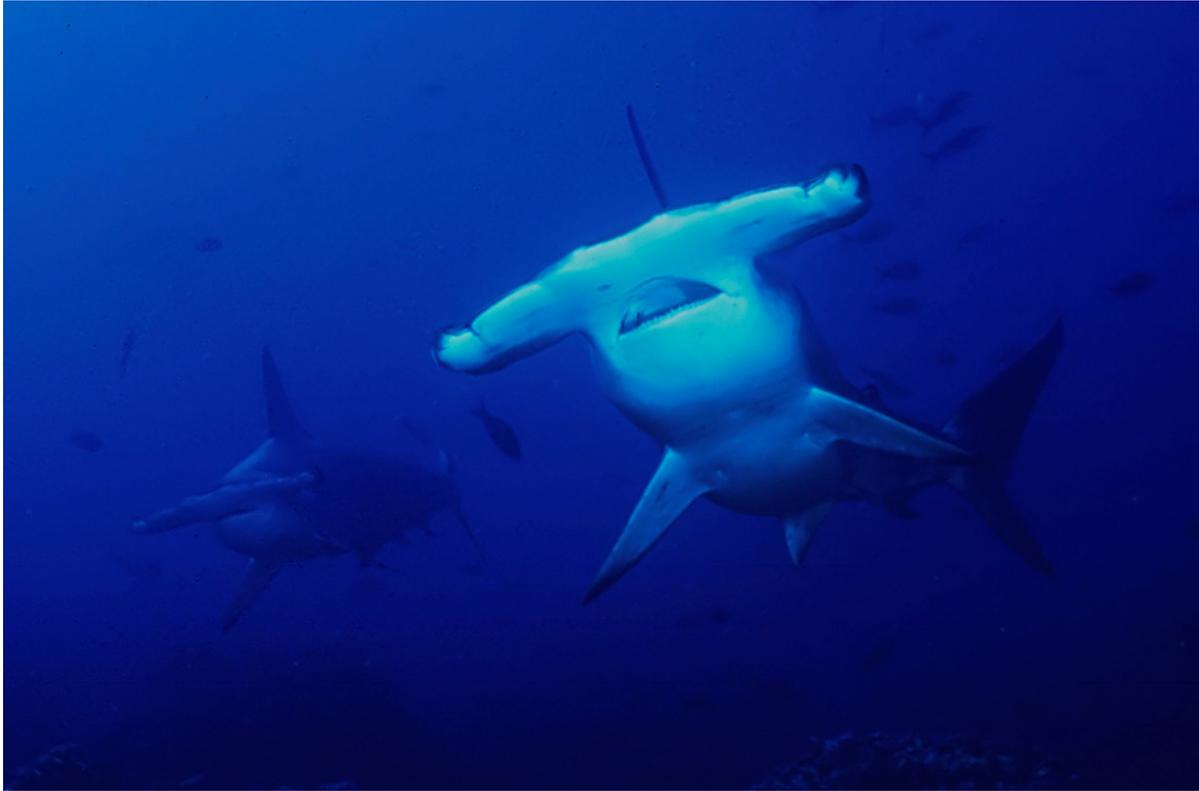


*Jacks at Las Animas*



*Barberfish, a Sea of Cortez icon*

I have seen a lot of sharks in the Sea of Cortez. I saw my first hammerhead and my first silky there.



*Hammerhead sharks*

Other areas of the world are richer in sharks now, notably Cocos Island in Costa Rica and the Galapagos Islands of Ecuador. Shark populations are declining in the Sea of Cortez because they are heavily fished. The main market is for fins, although I have seen some nomad fish camps where the filets are salted. Seeing sights like this, a panga full of fins from beautiful threshers, the rest of their bodies discarded and floating in the shallows, brought tears to my eyes:



*Thresher shark fins at Punta San Francisquito*



*Discarded thresher shark bodies*

Isla Guadalupe is a little volcanic belch of an island located 170 miles off of the west coast of Baja California, and about 280 miles south of the U.S. border. 22 miles long and 9 miles wide, it is barren above water but its shores and waters are rich with marine life. For decades it has been a destination for the long-range San Diego sport fishing boats, who load up on tuna and yellowtail from the waters around the island. Large colonies of fur seals and northern elephant seals haul out on its barren shores. It is probably the pinniped population that attracts Guadalupe's most famous inhabitants, great white sharks. A population of about 50 whites prowls the Guadalupe waters each fall. These sharks have spawned a small fleet of shark-watching boats operating out of San Diego and Ensenada. Divers on hookah rigs (regulators with long hoses attached to a compressor on the boat — thus the divers don't need tanks) view and photograph the whites from cages tethered to the mother boats. I scratched a very old itch in September of 2007 when I spent three days at the island with San Diego Shark Diving on the Mexican boat Andrea Lynn. I finally saw my first great white shark:



*Great white shark at Isla Guadalupe*

These caged and baited shark trips are surprisingly controversial. The criticisms usually take two forms, 1) the chumming and baiting changes the shark's behavior and makes them dependent on humans for food, increasing the danger for swimmers and surfers; and 2) the artificial atmosphere in which the sharks are seen. The first criticism, made long and loud by a group of San Francisco area surfers, actually shut down a white shark operation at the Farallon Islands just west of San Francisco Bay a few years ago. I believe the first criticism is false and is driven by the general hysterical fear of sharks which has been created by our media, starting with the old "Jaws" syndrome. Sharks, particularly those species which have

been around for as long as great whites, are opportunistic feeders and eat what they can, when they can. If the baited trips were to stop, the sharks would no doubt figure out some way to eat, probably in the same way they have eaten for the last 400 million years or so.

Based on what I saw on my Guadalupe trip, it is my personal, non-scientific opinion that these caged encounters are not really feeding experiences for the sharks. They actually consume very little food in the process. The baits are rarely eaten, rather they are toyed with by the sharks. In my opinion the baiting is a diversion for the sharks, like a cat playing with a toy. I think they simply enjoy the experience. When they are really hungry, they take care of that elsewhere.

The argument that caged shark trips create a danger for surfers and swimmers is, I believe, unsupportable. There is no evidence that baiting great white sharks, at significant distances from beaches where people swim and surf, increases the danger of shark attack for swimmers and surfers. Isla Guadalupe is 170 miles from any North American beach. It is difficult to imagine how baiting sharks at Guadalupe could have any effect on a North American swimmer or surfer, based on its remote location alone.

A more valid and thoughtful criticism, in my opinion, is the “zoo-like” artificial condition created by attracting the sharks with chum and bait. Clearly this does not present the shark in its natural condition, or represent its natural behavior. Nobody denies that, but compared with not ever seeing one alive and/or outside of an aquarium, I will gladly accept the opportunity to see one from the cage. I thought it was a thrilling, electric experience. Baited shark trips, targeting several different species, have become very popular among divers on several continents. The images that have been made on those trips have, I believe, positively impacted the perception of sharks among the non-diving population. Like aquariums, baited shark trips, on balance, have benefited sharks.

I believe one thing about these trips is undeniably true. The white shark population at Guadalupe would not exist but for the small fleet of shark-watching boats that operate there, and the publicity (and protection) that these trips have generated. The entire Guadalupe population of white sharks, estimated at about 50 individuals, could be completely wiped out by one fishing boat in about a week. Other than a small group of nomadic Mexican fishermen who work the island, no-one knew that great whites were there until a lot of long-range Guadalupe fishermen on the San Diego boats started landing only the severed heads of their big yellowfin tunas. The knowledge of the existence of great white sharks in clean water at Isla Guadalupe quickly spread to shark-watching outfits like San Diego Shark Diving, the one I was with on my trip. Soon several shark-watching boats were operating there, and great images of the sharks were being seen all over the world. This led to protection of the sharks by the Mexican government.

If the shark-watching industry had not “gotten there first”, I have little doubt that the shark-finning industry would have found them and done them great damage, potentially wiping them out. If that had happened, many people would have lost the chance, first-hand and in images, to see these magnificent, timeless animals in their natural habitat, for the benefit of the relative few who like to eat soup made from their fins.

The photographic opportunities were virtually endless for three solid days:

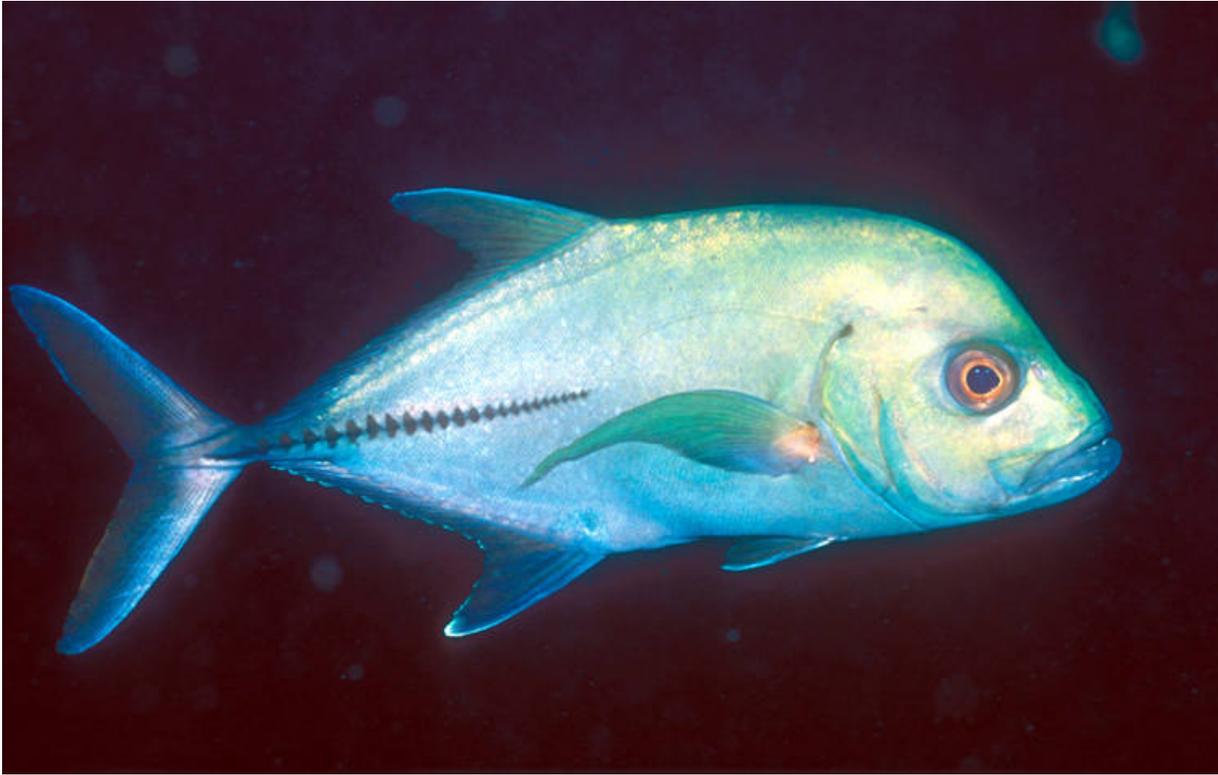


*Great white shark at Isla Guadalupe*



*Great white shark at Isla Guadalupe*

More Baja fish life:



*Green jack*



*Juvenile King Angelfish*



*Adult king angelfish*



*Cortez angelfish*



*Striped moray eel*



*Jeweled moray eel*



*Green moray eels at El Bajo (moray condos)*



*Green Moray eels at El Bajo*



*Pufferfish face*

If you look closely at the Baja reefs, and try to ignore the sharks and mantas that might be right behind you, you could be surprised at the little faces you see peering out at you from almost every opening:



*Tube blenny Acanthemblemaria crockeri*



*Tube blenny Acanthemblemaria crockeri*



*Tube blenny Acanthemblemaria crockeri*



*Tube blenny Acanthemblemaria macrospilus*



*Tube blenny Acanthemblemaria crockeri*



*Tube blenny Acanthemblemaria crockeri*



Redhead Goby *Elacatinus puncticulatus*



Triplefin *Lepidonectes corallicola*



*Longnosed hawkfish in black coral, wreck of the Salvatierra, near La Paz*

The Sea of Cortez is not known for its nudibranch population, but it does have some beautiful species:



*Nudibranch Hypselodoris agassizii*



*Nudibranch Hypselodoris agassizii*



*Nudibranch Chromodoris marislae*



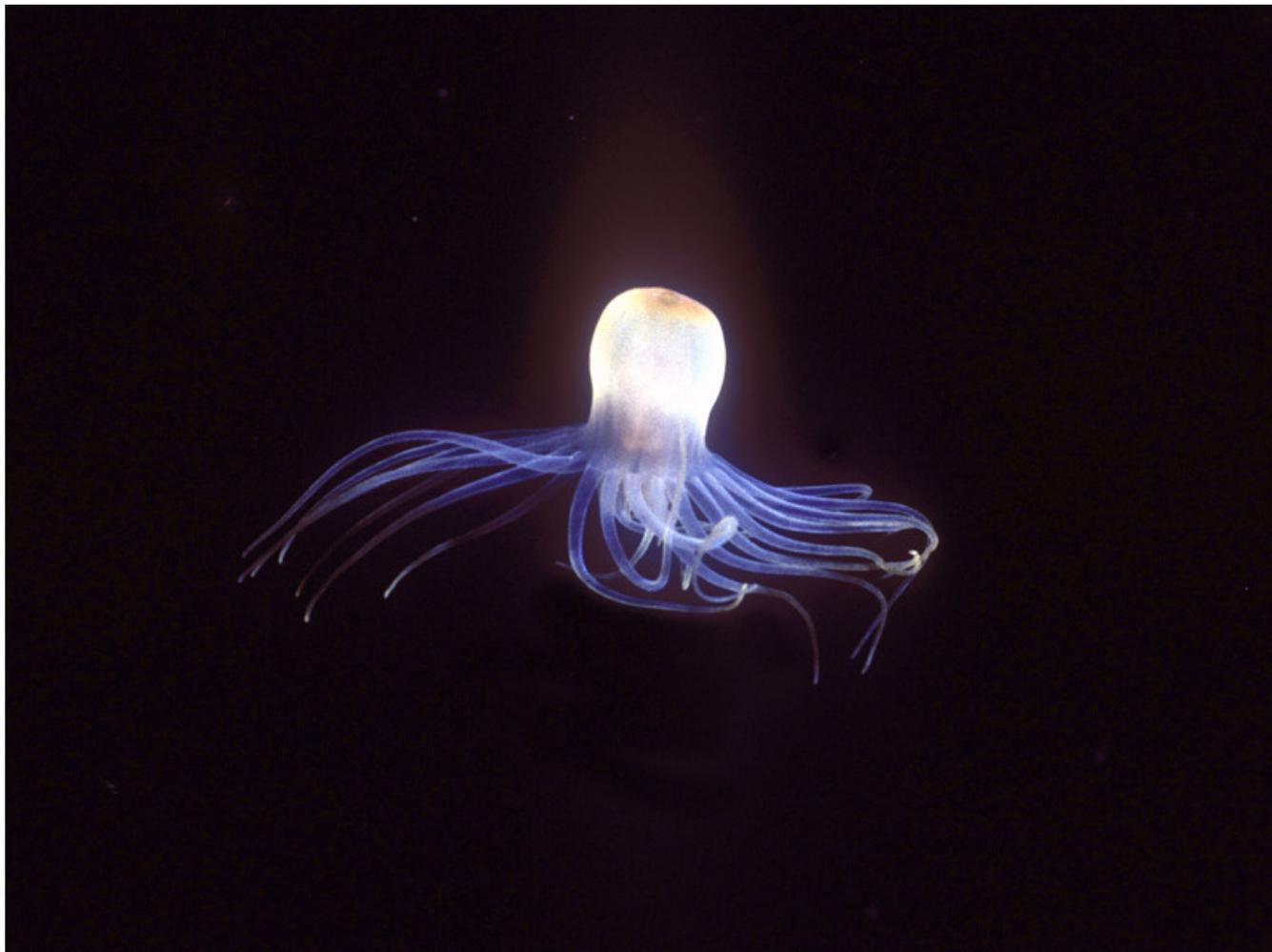
*Nudibranch Roboastra leonis*

Did I mention that I can't resist hermit crabs?



*Hermit crab*

Sometimes even the swim back to the boat results in some interesting photos:



*Jellyfish*

About 250 miles south of the tip of the Baja California peninsula is a small group of Mexican islands with the tongue-twisting name of Islas Revillagigedos. Because the largest of these islands is called Socorro, and that is a lot easier to say than Revillagigedos, they are often incorrectly called the Socorro Islands. Regardless of what you call them they offer some spectacular diving. These islands are home to one of the most beautiful fish in the world, the Clarion angelfish:



*Adult Clarion angelfish, Socorro Island*

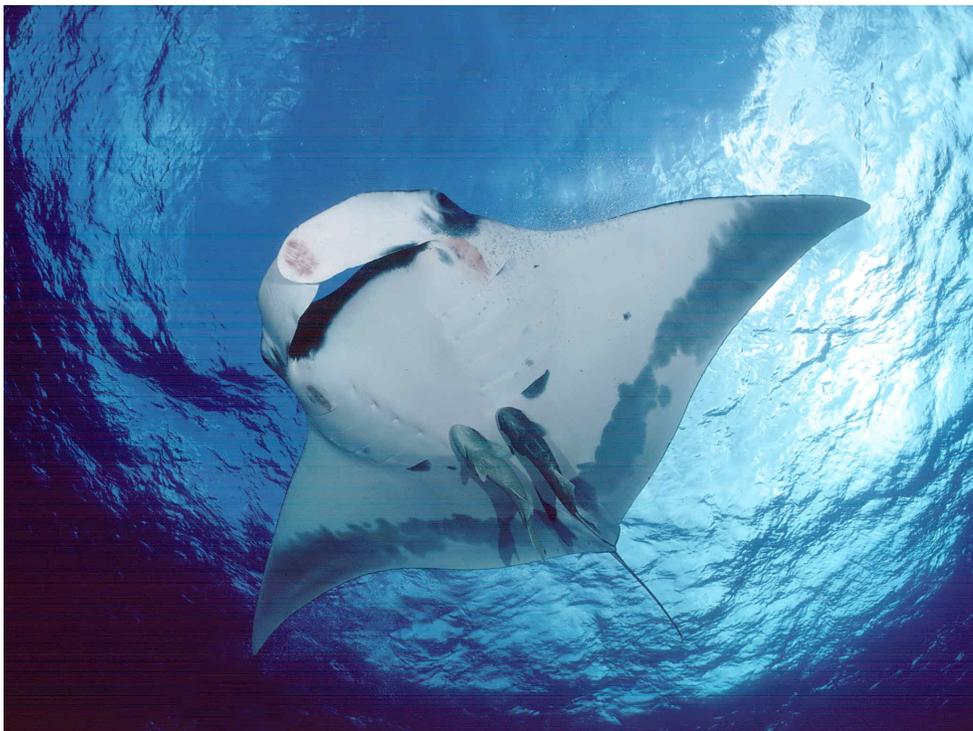


*Juvenile Clarion angelfish, Socorro Island*

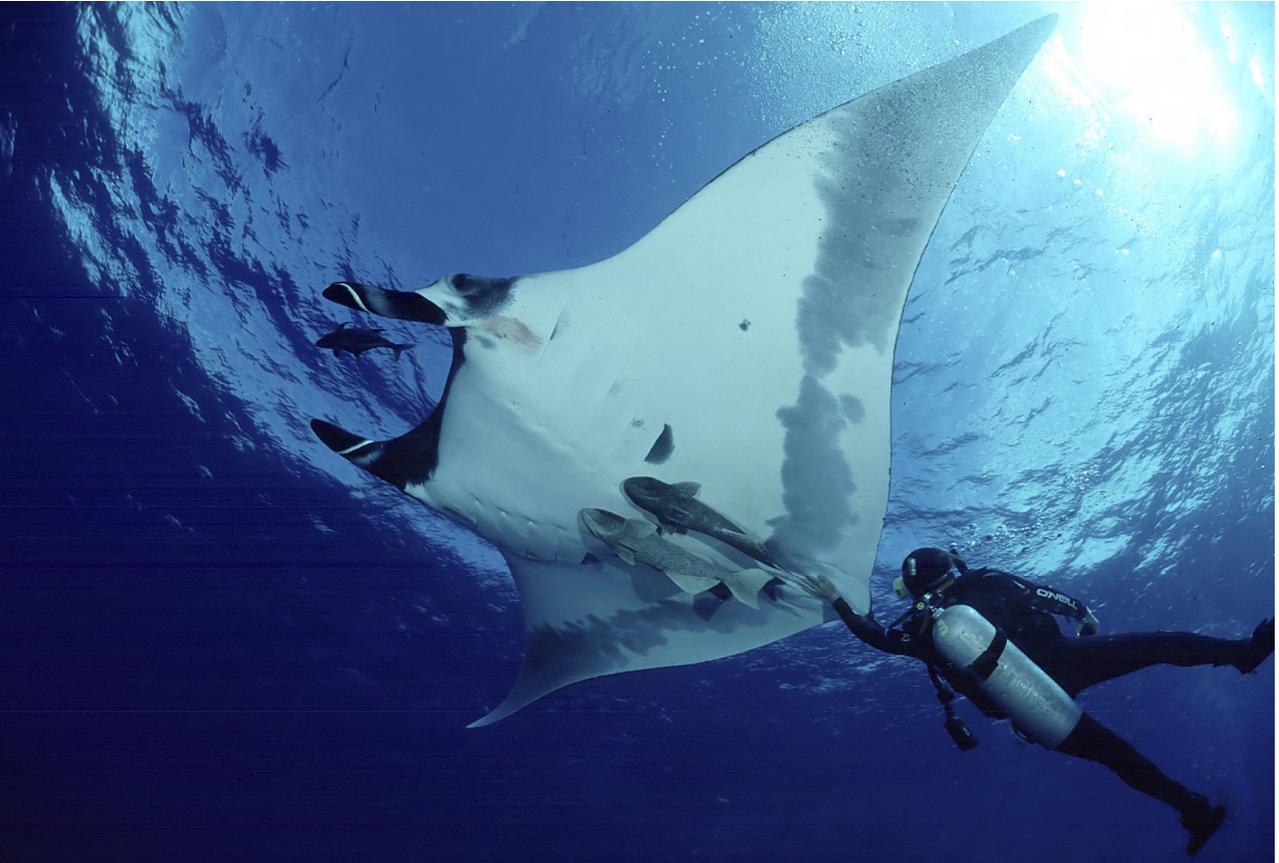
The primary reason divers come here is to see manta rays. At a place called The Boilers at Isla San Benedicto, very large Pacific manta rays congregate and interact with divers. I am not a big fan of touching marine life, but here the mantas literally demand it. They will stop and hover over you like space ships, quivering at the touch of your bubbles. If you don't attempt to touch them, they will go to another diver. Many attach anthropomorphic explanations for this, "*they really like humans...*" but I think it has something to do with cleaning behavior.



*Pacific manta ray with remoras, San Benedicto Island*



*Pacific manta ray with remoras, San Benedicto Island*



*Pacific manta ray with remoras and Coleen, San Benedicto Island*

The California gray whale, one of the thirteen great whales (12 with baleen plus one, the sperm whale, with teeth), spends its summers feeding in the waters of Alaska. But late every year, in November or December, that old primordial bell rings, they hear it, and they head south, making the longest migration of any mammal. They swim over 5,000 miles down the Pacific coast of North America to mate and bear their young in three shallow-water lagoons in Baja California. North to south these lagoons are called Laguna Ojo de Liebre, Laguna San Ignacio, and Bahía Magdalena. Laguna Ojo de Liebre is also called Scammons Lagoon, named for the American whaling captain who discovered, in 1857, what the whales do there every year, and slaughtered them by the thousands in the rest of the nineteenth century. The whales were killed primarily to provide oil in lamps.

Considering that, something happens now in those lagoons that is incomprehensible. After being killed to the point of extinction, in the cruelest possible ways, these magnificent animals now actually seem to have forgiven us, or at least forgotten what happened to them in these lagoons. There is a behavior that happens in the lagoons every year now that defies explanation. They now actually **demand** interaction with humans.

Each of the lagoons has a thriving “whale-watching” industry which is regulated by the Mexican government. Tourists view the whales in small, motor-driven fiberglass skiffs called pangas. In a behavior described as “friendly,” certain whales regularly try to climb into the pangas with the tourists. It is unnerving when a 50-ton animal places its chin on the gunnels of your little boat. I have chased whales in all three of the Baja lagoons; and by far my favorite is Laguna San Ignacio. It is much more remote and difficult to access than the other two lagoons, and the facilities are limited. It is spectacularly beautiful in its isolation. In my opinion, based on my experiences in all three lagoons, more “friendly” behavior takes place in Laguna San Ignacio. A fringe benefit to chasing whales in Laguna San Ignacio is the chance to spend a little time in the small Baja town of San Ignacio, with its magnificent town square and old, beautifully preserved mission church.



*Old mission church, San Ignacio, completed in 1786*

Most of the friendly whale behavior occurs late in the calving season, in February and March, after most of the mating has taken place and when many of the males have left the lagoons and headed north. It is not unusual for a female with calf to literally push the calf to the boat, thus introducing the youngster to humans. The whales allow themselves to be touched, actually in many cases they **demand** to be touched; if you don't scratch them they will move on to another panga.



*Just a little to the left, please*

The interaction between whales and humans in the Pacific Baja lagoons is one of the most amazing things I have seen in nature. It changes the life of almost every person who experiences it.



*Adult gray whale nuzzling our panga and getting scratched in Laguna San Ignacio*



*Pam's hand gently touching this whale's nose in Laguna San Ignacio*



*Late afternoon encounter in Laguna San Ignacio*

Except with a hard-to-get permit from the Mexican government, you can't get in the water with the whales in the calving lagoons. So when I am there I usually take a Nikonos V submersible camera with me in the panga, hold it underwater and fire blind when a whale is alongside the boat. Here I got a nice image of an adult whale eyeball. What magical things this eye must have seen:



*Gray whale eyeball, Laguna San Ignacio*



*Sunset at Laguna San Ignacio*

The blue whale is the largest animal to have ever lived. Adults are over 100 feet long. Like other baleen species they were killed almost to extinction, and now protected by most countries, they are making a comeback. They are reliably seen in the Sea of Cortez near Loreto every winter. Here, in one of my favorite images ever, is one near Puerto Escondido, just south of Loreto:



*Blue whale near Loreto*

