



Illustration by Dave van Patton

I Went Shark Fishing and Accidentally Caught a Kilo of Coke

It was worth a quarter of a million dollars

Mark “The Shark” Quartiano has been running shark-fishing expeditions off the coast of Miami for 40 years. His first was in 1976, shortly after the release of *Jaws*, and he estimates he’s caught more than 20,000 sharks since. The 65-year-old former fireman and policeman is [famous on Instagram](#) and [could pass for an aging WWE star](#). His past clients have included Robert De Niro, Clint Eastwood and Will Smith, but his charter on December 7th was just a group of University of Miami students taking a break from studying for finals. Their haul? A 9-foot hammerhead and a kilo of uncut South American cocaine.

We were about a mile off the coast of South Beach. The Gulf Stream, a warm ocean current that moves north along the coast of Florida, was unusually close that day. We happened to see a strange package floating by. I thought it was just floating debris. There are trillions of pieces of plastic swirling in the ocean, and millions of pieces of bigger debris that fish and dolphins get trapped under.

But as we got closer, I thought, *Uh oh, this could be something else.*

And it most certainly was—a bright yellow brick of cocaine:

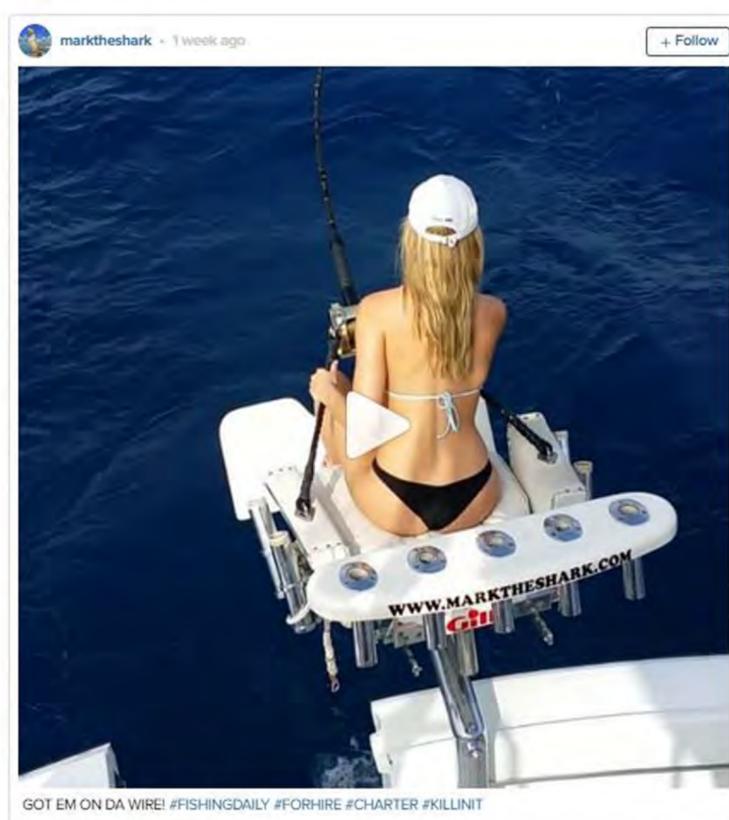


I said, “Lo and behold, it’s one of those [square groupers!](#)”

Though that isn’t exactly the right term. Square groupers are [80-pound marijuana bales](#). Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they were everywhere. We’d turn them in if we came across them. They weren’t too difficult to get out of the water because they were expertly packaged and waterproofed. I’ve known a few drug smugglers in my day, and their M.O. is to wrap their goods really tight so they’re able to withstand a big impact on water without breaking apart when they’re dropped from an airplane. It’s quite an engineering feat. Back in the day, I even witnessed a plane flying low on the water dropping a load off and a couple [go-fast boats](#) retrieve them.

All of which is to say it’s not unheard-of to see drugs floating in the water down here—especially the last few years. As a matter of fact, [the Coast Guard just had a big bust last week](#). They seized more than 100,000 pounds of cocaine worth \$715 million! It was the largest-ever Coast Guard bust.

Our bust was much smaller—roughly a kilo. One of my customers [scooped it out of the water](#), after which everyone started freaking out. All the kids on the boat were taking pictures and posing with it. To have something worth that much money in their hands—the Coast Guard later told us it was valued at \$250,000—was a unique experience. A couple of guys wanted to break it open and see what was in it, but I put a stop to that real quick. I felt an added responsibility given the age of my passengers. Plus, we were there to catch a big shark, which we did; we caught a big ol’ hammerhead not too long after we picked up the kilo:



At some point, I called the Coast Guard—I’ve taken a lot of their guys out on fishing trips so I’ve got a few of their numbers in my phone. We were in the middle of the charter, so they told me to keep it under wraps and give them a call when we finished. It was no big deal to them; they see this kind of thing all the time. They just said, “Call us when you’re a half-mile off of South Beach, and we’ll meet you and take it off your hands.”

If someone else found it, they might have had reason to be more nervous about it. But I’m not a drug smuggler. I never was a drug smuggler. And I never will be a drug smuggler. I’m the fisherman who’s caught more sharks than anyone else in the world. I don’t want to risk my whole career for something illegal. So they weren’t worried about me doing the right thing.

I also wasn’t really interested in broadcasting my catch. But news travels fast in Miami when it involves shark attacks and drugs—especially cocaine. This particular news traveled so fast that *Inside Edition* was waiting for us at the dock when we got back.



It was a circus. Soon, the whole city knew about it. The next day I couldn’t even go to the gas station without people asking, “Are you Mark the Shark, the guy who caught that cocaine yesterday?”

I’d definitely do it all over again, though. I was a police officer back in the 1970s, so it’s a pleasure to help the Coast Guard keep the drugs off the street.

—As told to C. Brian Smith