

The last shark hunter in Miami

Mark Quartiano has killed over 100,000 sharks, says Juliet Eilperin, and he's starting to feel a bit uneasy.

THE MASSIVE SCALLOPED hammerhead swaying over the deck of *Striker-1* brings Rosie O'Donnell to an abrupt halt in the middle of Florida's Biscayne Bay. Driving a motorboat with a gaggle of female friends, O'Donnell pulls up next to Mark Quartiano's 50-foot Hatteras and begins peppering him with questions. Pointing to the huge lifeless fish, she asks, "Is that for real?"

Mark "the Shark" Quartiano, who has operated a fishing charter here in Miami since 1976, is pleased with the attention. He works hard, seven days a week, and it's strangers' fascination with sharks that keeps his operation humming. The captain assures O'Donnell that the nearly 9-foot fish is genuine. She tells him that her son Blake is a shark aficionado who has spied *Striker-1* gliding by their vacation home on Star Island, the exclusive Miami enclave where the pop singer Gloria Estefan and the NBA star Shaquille O'Neal also own manses. "My son's going to flip out!" she exclaims, before hurrying back to the island.

Within minutes, O'Donnell returns on a gleaming dark red Jet Ski with Blake in tow. She is unabashed in her admiration of the hulking mass hanging by a rope, its black eyes on opposite ends of its rectangular head now glassy.

"We can't believe it!" she says, as she and Blake stroke the creature. "Oh my God. He feels like rubber."

O'Donnell wants to know who caught the shark, and Quartiano points to Stephanie Perez, a recent Texas Woman's University graduate who's about to pursue her master's degree in speech therapy. It was Perez's idea to book the charter this morning, bringing along her parents, boyfriend, brother, and brother's friend for the ride.

This brings another flurry of praise from O'Donnell. "And you're the one who caught it," she marvels. "Girl power!"

Later on, Perez says she isn't interested in making a wall mount of her catch: "Probably pictures are enough for me." And she remains agnostic about whether



Quartiano aboard *Striker-1* with a dead hammerhead

what she's taken part in today is good or bad. "I know this sounds harsh, but I guess it depends on how many sharks there are," she says. "If they're endangered, you shouldn't do it, but if they're bountiful..." Her voice trails off. "I'm really kind of indifferent on it, because I don't know enough to say anything."

Perez will walk off the boat without her big fish—which is, in fact, classified as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Regardless, the sight of it is enough to convince O'Donnell that she should take Blake shark fishing aboard *Striker-1*. As the two of them zoom away on their Jet Ski, Quartiano notes with satisfaction, "I don't think she's Greenpeace, right? That's a future customer." The shark has done the captain's advertising for him. "People ask me why I hang them up," he says. "That's why I hang them up. If you let

them go, you don't have anything. You almost don't have a story."

IF YOU'RE LOOKING for a 21st-century incarnation of Captain Quint, the obsessive shark hunter from *Jaws*, Quartiano comes pretty close. While he's a friendlier, more service-oriented version, the Florida charter-boat captain has built his entire professional reputation on his ability to slay the scariest sharks in the sea. Quartiano used to hunt sharks for his own amusement off Miami Beach, but he's spent most of his career ensuring that other anglers can tell their own big-fish stories. He started out working as a police officer and then became a firefighter, at which point he managed to work four days a week and fish the other three days. Once he cobbled together enough sponsors to support himself by fishing full-time, he made the switch, and at this point he's the only charter operator who still targets sharks. By his own estimate, he has killed at least 100,000 sharks over the course of his career: As he likes to joke, he's outlasted his competitors, as well as the scores of sharks he's hauled on board over the years.

Quartiano models himself in part after legendary shark hunters

like Frank Mundus, who fished off Long Island in the 1950s and '60s—when there were still plenty of sharks around to catch. Mundus earned the nickname Monster Man for the sharks he caught off Montauk, N.Y., and claimed he was the inspiration for Captain Quint, though author Peter Benchley said the character was a composite. Mundus caught two massive great whites in the course of his 40-year career, but eventually he embraced conservation, retired to Hawaii in 1991, and largely gave up shark hunting. Quartiano, however, has yet to temper his pursuit.

In fact, Mark the Shark prides himself on finding new species to kill in order to satisfy his customers, like the thresher sharks he's managed to cull from a nearby area where they gather to give birth. He is no longer allowed to catch threshers under state law, which complicates this task. While he's

careful to adhere to state and federal rules, he thinks people apply a double standard when it comes to shark fishing. “You get people who don’t like to hurt animals, but they’re mostly hypocrites,” Quartiano once told a local magazine. “They want to release everything; meanwhile they go home and eat big juicy steaks.”

Quartiano cannot be called a hypocrite: He lets people know exactly where he stands. He parks his boat right outside one of Miami’s big South Beach hotels, perched next to a black-and-white sandwich-board sign that extols the virtues of “Mark the Shark’s Monster Fishing Charters.” The tiny beachcomber shop he runs is yards away, its walls lined with at least a hundred shark jaws. “This is nothing, I’ve got a warehouse full of them,” he explains as I marvel at the dry, jagged teeth looming above me. He even looks the part: Deeply tanned, with a weathered face and blond-streaked hair, he wears sunny yellow fishermen’s overalls that are both practical and symbolic, evoking America’s fishing past.

It is harder work now pleasing his customers than it was in the past, and he blames commercial fishermen who set long-lines. These fishing lines with baited hooks frequently end up snaring sharks, which then drown. There’s no question that the sharks caught unintentionally from such activities, known as bycatch, far outnumber the targeted fish, be it tuna or swordfish.

“Those long-liners do more damage in a night than we do in a year,” he says. And Quartiano simply does not believe that species such as bigeye thresher sharks are endangered, because he still hauls them in on his rod and reel. “I’ve caught more than anyone else on the planet. There’s no way they’re endangered.”

Data collected by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Fisheries Service tell a different story: Federal officials estimate that recreational landings of large coastal sharks outpaced commercial catches for 15 out of 21 years between 1981 and 2001, with U.S. recreational anglers catching 12 million sharks, skates, and rays in 2004 alone. At this point, NOAA estimates that recreational anglers in the U.S. catch roughly 200,000 sharks a year. Apparently, all those bachelor and bachelorette parties add up.

It’s a classic case of tunnel vision: Humans fail to comprehend the massive impact

of our collective activities on the planet because we think of ourselves as lone actors. In 2007, for example, 12 million anglers made nearly 87 million fishing trips on the Atlantic, Pacific, and Gulf coasts, catching roughly 468 million fish. That’s more than one fish for every man, woman, and child in the United States, and then some.

Boris Worm, a marine biologist at Canada’s Dalhousie University, puts it another way: “Say you have only one in a thousand Americans catch a shark each year. That’s 300,000 sharks a year, just like that. I don’t think we understand how many of us there



Blacktip reef sharks meet up in a lagoon in the Pacific Ocean.

are.” We dwarf every other large animal on earth in terms of numbers, and that has consequences.

That’s the message carried by marine biologist Neil Hammerschlag, director of the R.J. Dunlap Marine Conservation Program at the University of Miami’s Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science. Hammerschlag relentlessly attacks Mark the Shark and other recreational shark hunters, using every forum he can to question their activities—debating Quartiano in a sportfishing magazine or crusading against him on his website, NeilHammer.com. The elaborate website features not only a section on how recreational shark fishing is taking its toll (including a photograph of Quartiano displaying two massive dead sharks) but details about conservation efforts and Hammerschlag’s own research.

Hammerschlag has mulled the idea of mobilizing activists to set up a picketing operation near the Marriott to discourage the weekend warriors who patronize Quartiano’s business. In the end, though, he realized it would only give Quartiano additional media exposure and motivation to “live up to the legend he’s trying to create for himself.”

“ANY SHARK THAT swims, I can kill,” Quartiano says, burnishing his legend with little provocation. “I get paid to kill fish. Some people don’t like it, but too bad.” If environmentalists have such a big problem with his activities, he reasons, they should pay him to park his boat. In an era of government bailouts, Quartiano jokes, he’s happy to take his place in line at the federal trough. “Basically, my ultimate goal is to get subsidized by the government. They pay farmers not to farm, right? I want to get paid not to fish.”

Despite his bravado, Quartiano has been feeling a little uneasy lately about his activities. He even acknowledges occasionally that he might be contributing to the fishes’ demise, though he still sees long-liners as the No. 1 enemy. He wants sharks to stick around long enough for his son Maverick—whom he describes as “fearless”—to kill them. So he’s been doing his part, bringing some of his catches back to local scientists, which he says more than justifies his business.

“How else are you going to get data on some species of sharks?” he asks, adding that it’s no use throwing them back into the sea if they’ve died by the time they’re hauled into the boat. “This is how they’re going to get them. They may not like it. They’re specimens. Like it or not, we’re going to catch ’em. If we catch an endangered species, why should we let it sink to the bottom?” He also says he tags 200 to 250 sharks a year for NOAA’s Fisheries Service.

But his main business remains helping his customers catch sharks. And they can find his boat parked outside Miami’s big South Beach hotels, as it has been for 35 years. Bachelor and bachelorette parties welcome, all the wine and beer they can drink. If they’ve got \$1,200 for a daylong ride, they’ll probably come home with a trophy. He’s the last shark hunter in Miami, a survivor of close calls at sea and a business that pitches up and down along with the economy. In the end, he will hazard only a guess as to whether he thinks his prey will survive over the long term. “Sharks are cool,” he says, shortly before I head out to catch my water taxi back to shore. “Hopefully, they’ll be here after we’re gone.”

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