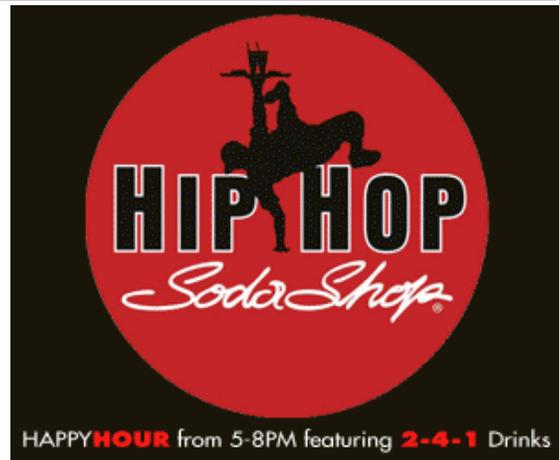




Shark Huggers

Tourists can't wait to get next to them — even if they *are* eating machines.

By Amy Guthrie
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Amy Guthrie



Fresh kill. "Mark the Shark" Quartiano (far left) and a charter fishing client pose with a sandbar shark they reeled in; a sandbar strung up from Quartiano's *Striker-1* yacht at the Marriott Biscayne Bay Marina.

Courtesy of Samuel Gruber



Renowned shark researcher Samuel "Sonny" Gruber demonstrates how to be kind to animals by kissing a shark in Bimini.

Courtesy of Kent Bonde



Cristina Zenato, a professional shark diving guide, poses with a reef shark off Freeport, Grand Bahama Island.

Courtesy of Kent Bonde



Kent Bonde's calf after being bitten by a bull shark. Humans are not on

Markus Groh felt uneasy aboard the *M/V Shear Water*. A buddy had talked him into booking a six-night trip on the charter boat with nine other Austrians to scuba-dive with sharks in the Bahamas. There would be dead fish in the water to attract the big boys — tiger sharks, lemon sharks, hammerheads, and bull sharks — and there would be no cages to protect the divers. Only wetsuits. It would be the experience of a lifetime.

So there he was on the morning of February 24, about to step off a 65-foot watercraft and into the ocean. At age 49, Groh was handsome and healthy. His nimble five-foot-nine frame carried just 147 pounds, and his long, thick black locks were turning gray. Back home in Vienna, he was a lawyer and a divorced father of an 11-year-old girl. Out there above the aquamarine wilderness, he was an adventurer. Groh took the plunge.

Groh and two other Austrian divers settled 70 feet below the surface and positioned themselves around a plastic crate filled with fish bits. Smelling dinner, a gang of stockily built bull sharks arrived. The species has a thug reputation: They tend to be tough and territorial, greeting potential prey with head-butts. The Austrians were trespassing in the bulls' underwater kingdom.

Shortly after 9 a.m., dive master Grey O'Hara descended with a fresh crate of bait. He saw the Austrians lying supine on the sandy bottom, 20 feet apart, snapping pictures of the sharks weaving among them. O'Hara lashed the crate to a weight at the end of a rope dangling from the surface. The crate settled onto the ocean floor, just 10 feet from Groh. Suddenly a seven-foot-long bull shark bumped the chum box with its snout, nudging it perilously close to Groh.

O'Hara, anticipating trouble, rushed toward his client. A mere two feet separated bait from human. In an instant, a sand cloud filled the cobalt depths, obscuring the horror of a shark sinking its teeth into Groh's left calf muscle, slashing through arteries and veins. Groh rolled on his back in an effort to shake the shark. O'Hara grabbed his customer's tank and kicked the shark — one, two, three times. The shark released Groh and swam away placidly.

O'Hara rushed the injured tourist to the surface. Once onboard the *Shear*

the shark menu, Bonde insists.



Subject(s):
[sharks](#), [shark tourism](#),
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Water, Groh passed out. He was bleeding profusely. The crew and passengers, surrounded by scuba tanks on deck, swaddled him in blankets and raised the shredded leg above his heart. They poured a coagulant powder into the gaping eight-inch wound in order to staunch the bleeding. The boat's captain, Jim Abernethy, radioed the U.S. Coast Guard for help.

The wait must have been unbearable. The *Shear Water* — surrounded by water as far as the eye could see — was anchored 65 miles east of the trauma centers of South Florida. The nearest landmark was a rock formation known as Great Isaac's Light, notable only for its abandoned lighthouse. At one point, Groh's heart stopped. The crew administered CPR. Abernethy told his passengers that, in 25 years of organizing shark dives, he "never believed this would ever happen."

The Coast Guard chopper arrived at 10:20 a.m., 50 minutes after receiving the distress call. O'Hara accompanied a still-unconscious Groh to Ryder Trauma Center at Jackson Memorial Hospital, where the diver was pronounced dead at 11:33 a.m.

The Miami-Dade County Medical Examiner declared the death accidental and listed the cause as "exsanguination." Groh had bled to death.

Apart from inspiring tasteless lawyer jokes on Internet message boards, the incident stirred calls for the Bahamas to ban shark diving.

The world's love-hate relationship with sharkdom has created a sprawling, often bizarre industry of shark adventures, from vicious killing expeditions to face-to-face encounters designed to debunk the animal's scary image. Even legitimate scientists are getting in on the act by turning their facilities into entertainment venues for wide-eyed diving tourists hungry to rendezvous with the creatures.

Practically every day of the week, dive masters lead tourists into Bahamian waters to interact with wild sharks. From several feet away, the spectacle is like an underwater circus. Plenty of tourists climb into the invisible ring to caress shark bellies and tails. Typically the spectators emerge with dazzling photographs, a newfound appreciation for sharks, and one hell of a fish tale to share with the folks back home. Sometimes would-be shark huggers have experiences akin to religious epiphanies.

The waters around South Florida are a mecca for shark observation and research. More than a dozen species call this region home at least part of the year, especially during mating season. Their migrations along Florida's coasts make for spectacular aerial images and lure shark lovers from across the globe who yearn to get up-close-and-personal with these majestic predators. But, as Groh's fate indicates, these adrenaline-filled comminglings can have lethal consequences.

The ocean is no petting zoo.

Many a mariner has spun uncharitable shark tales replete with references to serial-killer stares, jagged rows of sawlike teeth, and feeding frenzies. Yet even a fisherman decrying how a shark ravaged his catch still on the hook can contemplate the beasts with awe. In *Moby Dick*, 19th-century seafarer Herman Melville described the way sharks scooped perfectly symmetrical globular bites out of sperm whales as "all but miraculous." Unless you have seen countless sharks feasting joyously on a dead leviathan, Melville wrote, "then suspend your decision about devil worship."

Pacific islanders built shrines to shark gods, whom they believed to be guardians of the sea. The deities were said to have saved Hawaiians from calamities such as shipwrecks, and, on occasion, the shark

gods took human form to dance with a man or make love to a woman. Sailor lore also speaks of sharks ravaging the dead and dying bodies of humans, apparently even learning which vessels might provide a meal. The beasts are said to have regularly trailed overloaded slave ships en route to the Western Hemisphere so they could catch the lifeless Africans who got tossed overboard.

Most modern landlubbers, though, gave little thought to sharks until 1974, when Peter Benchley's best-selling novel *Jaws* — followed the next year by Steven Spielberg's haunting film adaptation — drove panicky swimmers out of the ocean. The sight of a fin slicing through the water's surface, accompanied by one of the creepiest instrumental tracks ever, made a vast swath of the American public damn near afraid to get into the bathtub, to say nothing of the open sea.

Jaws would inspire a whole new generation of shark hunters, including South Florida's notorious Mark Quartiano. After he became a charter boat captain, Quartiano dubbed himself "Mark the Shark." His website claims he has caught "more sharks on rod and reel than any human being on the planet!" For his zealous decimation of the shark population, Quartiano has become a well-known and widely despised figure among environmentalists and animal rights activists. No one better embodies the old, largely discredited notion of sharks as ruthless enemies that can, and maybe should, be destroyed at every opportunity.

Why kill sharks? "Because they're mean," Quartiano says. "I'm a hunter, not a conservationist." Besides, he argues, injured, traumatized animals who have been forcibly pulled from the ocean on fishermen's hooks wouldn't survive anyway if they were released back into the water (an assertion with which most marine biologists heatedly disagree). Of course, there's money in the hunt too. Full-day charters run \$1,200 a pop, and Quartiano earns a commission if a customer wants to have his prize mounted. The trophy shops, however, can use only the shark's jaws because the animal's hide is almost impossible to preserve. So the mount is essentially a fiberglass replica.

For Mark the Shark, there's a thrill in the hunt as well as the kill. When a beast gets close enough to the deck of *Striker-1*, Quartiano's 50-foot Hatteras yacht, he stabs it with a harpoon; then, with the help of long hooks, he and his mate, Tim O'Hare, yank the beast onto the boat by its gills. Sensing they're in for the battle of their lives, the sharks thrash frantically from side to side. The odds are strongly against them: Out of water, sharks have little mobility or momentum. Blood spurts from their puncture wounds as they slowly suffocate on the deck. And the unholy smell of ammonia-tinged death overwhelms the sea air.

On a recent Monday, Quartiano is scouring the waters a mile off South Beach. Just the sight of a tug on the line gets him hootin' and hollerin'. "Ay-yi-yi! Nice fish, that one. Battle stations, baby!" At that, the charter customer of the day, a middle-age man from Ohio, passes his can of Miller Lite to his wife and lumbers into a fishing chair suspended over the open water. Several dull minutes tick by as the client cranks the reel until, finally, it's time to wrestle a shark into the boat.

It's a seven-foot-long sandbar shark. "You wouldn't want to go swimming with *that*, trust me," Quartiano says. Quartiano himself *never* goes into the ocean. "If I'm gonna swim, it's gonna be in a pool, because I'm a firm believer in karma, if you will. Poetic justice for the sharks. They're waiting for me to make that one plunge in the water for a couple of minutes. I'm deathly afraid of the ocean, I really am. I've got a phobia of the water.

"I know so much about sharks. I respect them, but I also fear them. I'm afraid of them because I think that eventually, you know, karma or whatever. Look at Steve Irwin and how he died ... some stupid little thing."

After the Ohio man hooks another sandbar, Quartiano idles the *Striker-1* near Fisher Island as O'Hare wraps a thick rope around the tail of the creature and suspends it in the air. The shark writhes and gnashes. For good measure, O'Hare strings up the other, now-dead sandbar. It's picture time.

Carnage draws a crowd. A man behind the wheel of a red speedboat pulls in for a closer look. "Holy moley!" he shouts. "Where'd you catch *that*?" The live sandbar wriggles, as if on cue. "Kill that sucker!" the boater yells. Around the same time, a Coast Guard cutter cruises by; spotting the sharks, the men on deck cheer and pump their fists.

But the days of big shark catches are drawing to a close. "Half the sharks you could be able to kill five years ago, you can't kill now," Quartiano grumbles. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will soon prohibit recreational anglers from landing sandbar sharks. In the Atlantic, the NOAA Fisheries Service also considers blacktips, bulls, tigers, and hammerheads to be overfished.

Some sharks are caught inadvertently on lines set for other, more commercially appealing fish. But demand for the big beasts' fins is still strong in Asia, where shark fin soup is a decadent dish that well-heeled ethnic Chinese serve at weddings and other special occasions. To satiate the demand for fins, fishermen frequently slice the valuable bits off sharks and release the rudderless creatures into the water to either starve or be eaten by other animals; finning is banned in U.S. waters.

Marine biologists such as Samuel "Sonny" Gruber warn that threats to sharks are threats to the entire marine ecosystem. "Take away the top predators and all their prey suffers," Gruber says. Without sharks, the entire system could collapse.

Gruber is a world-renowned researcher of shark behavior who loves to "debunk shark myths." In the late Fifties, during his junior year at the University of Miami, Gruber had a life-altering experience. He was spearfishing near Fowey Rocks Light, in Biscayne National Park, when a giant hammerhead began circling him, inspiring both terror and awe. To Gruber, the enormous fish was beautiful, more so because it didn't consume him. He knew then that he wanted to learn more about sharks.

Early on, Gruber sponsored shark fishing tournaments so he could get specimens to study. But lab work was boring, so Gruber took to the field. He monitored lemon shark populations in the Florida Keys. He discovered substances that can repel the creatures. And he noticed that, when flipped upside down, sharks enter a trancelike state that enables researchers to fiddle with them in relative safety.

In 1990, Gruber established a research station in Bimini, a cluster of small islands in the western Bahamas. There the station is known simply as "the shark lab." Gruber is now semiretired at age 70, but his little research base is still bustling with scientists, volunteers, students, and visitors — all of whom affectionately refer to him as "Doc." This year alone, the BBC, Discovery Channel's *Myth Busters*, and National Geographic — among others — have filmed segments at the station. Slaughtering sharks is a thing of the past for Gruber. "We don't kill sharks," he says firmly.

It's a recent day in May, and the Bimini Sands Resort has called on Gruber to entertain a group of 45 French tourists seeking an honest-to-goodness eco-adventure. Being a good neighbor, Gruber has organized a shark swim for the hotel guests. On the way there, he tells *New Times*: "You'll see that sharks are cute and cuddly."

A three-piece Calypso band plays a favorite local tune, "Lay Low in Bimini," on the white sand beach as Gruber outlines the basics of the shark encounter, via a translator, for the tourists. The French group is likely to get close to Caribbean reef sharks, he explains, which Gruber and his assistants have "trained" over the years by feeding them at the surface.

"Normally they're on the bottom," he says, "but these sharks know us. When we come with our boat, they know, *Oh, — we're gonna get lunch*. And it's not gonna be you that's the lunch. They're gonna get food. They don't want you. Of course, French food, maybe — I don't know."

The crowd laughs. A French woman pipes in, "Wait until they taste us!"

Gruber continues, "I want you to all stay close together. See, when the sharks see a large number of people close together, they see that as a wall, and they just stay away from it."

"If anyone gets bitten by a shark, we'll just go ahead and put a Band-Aid on it. Not to worry," he jokes.

Gruber quickly notes that "nobody has ever got bitten," and he recommends that every able body in the group take advantage of the opportunity because "it's very safe" and "once in a lifetime."

The French group asks one final question before heading offshore: Are sharks in danger? Gruber answers in the affirmative. "The Chinese have become very wealthy, and they cut off the fins because they think it makes them sexy."

Two shark lab boats motor out ahead of the tourists to prime the reef for sharks. They anchor at a location known in Bimini as triangle rocks, because of three formations that poke out of the water. The lab staffers call this spot "the arena." Here they conduct tests for products such as shark repellent. Enthusiasts and commercial fishermen alike are hoping that such a repellent, if sprayed on fishing hooks, will prevent sharks from bothering — and becoming — catch. Of course, galeophobes (people who fear sharks) might also want to slather themselves in a sunscreenlike version of the stuff before taking a dip in the ocean.

Gruber slips disposable plastic gloves onto his hands before reaching into a large blue cooler for bits of barracuda. He tosses the morsels into the water one by one, like a retiree might offer bread crumbs to ducks swimming in a pond. "C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, you guys. C'mon, reefies," he pleads.

A solitary reef shark shows up. It's a start, but not quite the spectacle Gruber had promised. Then the animal swims off, spooked by the arrival of the tourists in a pontoon boat. Gruber is deflated. "I never got skunked here. Normally we have a roiling mass of sharks."

But they are elusive creatures. Even when presented with a free meal, they might not grace human beings with their presence.

Unaware that the show had stalled, a dozen Frenchmen flop into the ocean wearing snorkel masks and fins. They swim haplessly in waters slick with 100 pounds of chum. For the grand finale, the shark lab's young manager, Sean Williams, bursts out of the water carrying two bottles of Moët champagne. The French crowd is giddy.

A similar show last year ended more fittingly. Williams emerged in the center of a bunch of sharks, tapping them on the nose with the bottles of bubbly as he cleared his way to the surface.

Sharing close quarters with sharks is the reason a steady stream of twentysomethings takes residence at the shark lab. Most are conservation-minded aspiring marine biologists, and all are essentially obsessed with the finned creatures. These are the kids who saw *Jaws* when they were tykes and thought, *I want to swim with THAT!*

As biology students, the dozen or so residents of the shark lab are keenly aware that feeding wild sharks might influence their behavior, perhaps even conditioning them to expect food from boaters. So they try to keep the feedings to a minimum.

Tristan Guttridge, a 25-year-old doctoral candidate who arrived at the lab in January 2006, is

researching social organization among lemon sharks, which are abundant in Bimini. Lemons return to the western Bahamas each year to give birth in the same estuaries where they themselves were born.

Guttridge, a cheery bleach-blond Brit with blue eyes and a helluva sunburn, spends hours at a time perched in an observation tower with a pair of binoculars, trying to determine how lemon sharks interact. After two years, Guttridge says, at least five animals that hang together are still in the vicinity. He characterizes the network he's mapped out as a MySpace or Facebook for sharks.

When surveyed, the residents of the lab all nominate Guttridge as "the most obsessed" with sharks. Hearing this, Guttridge flashes a sheepish grin. He does in fact remember wanting to swim with sharks after watching *Jaws*. And his longstanding enthusiasm for the beasts is contagious.

"My mother still has a Mother's Day card that I decorated with sharks all over when I was seven," he recounts. Guttridge's parents embraced his passion, even paying for him to dunk into the waters off the coast of South Africa, in a cage, to swim with great whites for his 21st birthday.

The folks at the lab reckon that each live shark in the Bahamas generates several thousand dollars in tourism revenue for the island nation each year. Perhaps they're right. At least a half-dozen dive outfits in the Bahamas offer encounters with the creatures, each declaring itself a pioneer in the field. Most employ chum to attract the animals. And the practice is self-regulated.

Three days a week, Cristina Zenato, a 36-year-old Italian diver, dons a chain mail suit and descends 40 feet for shark dives. For the most part, the mackerel and herring she hands out attract Caribbean reef sharks. They are docile enough to let her stroke their heads and undersides. The recreational divers she leads into the water kneel on the sand, arms tucked in tight, as if genuflecting before sacred creatures. Zenato says she has never been afraid while in the water with the sharks, and that she can sense when they've had a rough day.

"Looking at their behavior," she says, "I know what's been done to them. If someone has been chumming the water, they get very agitated. If they've been caught and released, they become very wary and it's hard to get them to interact. I've even pulled hooks out over the years."

Zenato has been on a dive with Captain Abernethy on the *Shear Water*, which she says was a completely different yet still enthralling experience compared with the touristy encounters she leads for a company called Unexo on Grand Bahama Island. Abernethy and his crew suspend the bait box just a few feet above the sandy bottom of the sea bed, and they attract large sharks that are traditionally thought to be aggressive. Observers are expected to maintain a 15-foot distance between themselves and the grub, and Abernethy asks that they pause between taking photos to assess the situation around them.

"I've seen him pull people out of the water for not following the rules," Zenato says.

Like the shark lab, Jim Abernethy's Scuba Adventures hosts many underwater camera crews. Last November, Canadian documentarian Rob Stewart, who directed the 2006 film *Sharkwater*, joined three attractive young blond women aboard the *Shear Water*, which docks in Riviera Beach. The idea was to show that anyone — even three hot babes — can swim safely with sharks and live to tell about it.

The trailer for the film short, called *Shark Angels*, opens with eerie, suspenseful music straight out of a Gothic opera. Lemon sharks writhe in circles among bubbles from scuba tanks. Tiger sharks slither an inch above the white sand of the sea bed. The black silhouettes of divers drift down from the boat, through clear aquamarine water, toward the sharks. The lateral fin of one Jurassic-looking beast sweeps an inch in front of a diver's mask.

A soothing female voice narrates, "We've always loved to hate our monsters. And sharks are some of the scariest." Flash to another image: Flexible cartilage flips backward as a shark throws its jaws open in the direction of a black patch that's difficult to make out. Is it a fish? Chum on a stick? A diver's fin? The shark tears at the morsel with such swift force that the image becomes an indecipherable swirl of turbid white and gray dorsal, with a glimmer of sunshine beyond.

"We've been programmed to believe they're bloodthirsty killing machines," the narrator continues. Cut to an image of the divers kneeling on the sand, face-to-face with a gray beast. The shark tilts its body upward 45 degrees to avoid them. As the creature swishes over their heads, one diver reaches up to stroke its belly with her hand. "But sharks are also one of the most misunderstood and most hunted animals on the planet."

It's similar to the spiel offered by Captain Abernethy, who has refused to speak with media outlets, including *New Times*, in the wake of Markus Groh's death. His dive shop continues to operate day trips off the coast of Palm Beach. Inquiries about shark encounters get a frigid response from the shop's receptionists, though. Callers are informed that, in light of the Groh incident, the *Shear Water* won't be transporting passengers to shark haunts for some time.

According to his company website, www.scuba-adventures.com, Abernethy "dives every day, and each day is like his first." The site says he is a Florida native who has worked as a dive boat captain and scuba instructor since 1981, and has been diving off the Palm Beaches and the Bahamas for more than 30 years.

Abernethy has long spoken out about the supposed benefits of feeding, and then swimming with, sharks. "[Chum dives] provide people with firsthand knowledge of what the species is all about. We are teaching people that sharks are beautiful creatures that need to be protected," he told a reporter in 2000.

Then, in the summer of 2001, a few high-profile attacks (on surfers in Volusia County, an eight-year-old in the panhandle, and a Wall Street banker in the Bahamas) convinced Florida officials they should pass a law against chumming during shark dives. Some marine conservationists were equating chum dives with forbidden feedings of other wildlife, such as bears and alligators. Florida spearfishers and lobster divers were also opposed to chum diving, saying the practice taught sharks to equate humans with food.

As Florida wildlife officials mulled a statewide ban on shark chumming, Abernethy told a news crew: "I don't think there's a shark in the world that would bite you unless he was confused." Florida banned shark-feeding dives in September 2001. At the time, only three dive shops even offered such excursions. One of them was Jeff Torode's South Florida Diving Headquarters in Pompano Beach. Torode says the law was a political ploy and that concerns about feeding sharks are overblown. "A fishing boat can pull up right next to us and put chum in the water, and that's legal," he explains. "If you can put fish in the water to kill them, why not to look at them?"

Torode scrapped his shark dives when they were banned in Florida. But Abernethy simply changed locales, carrying passengers from Palm Beach County to the waters of the Bahamas.

February was a busy month for the folks at Jim Abernethy's Scuba Adventures. The *Shear Water* was booked with three consecutive trips for "European shark enthusiasts," as Abernethy refers to the passengers in entries into his Captain's Blog on the company website. The post about the February 1 voyage employs church words such as *blessed* and *prayers*, as if the charter captain were unveiling a new religion:

"The water was clear and the sharks were plentiful.... At the end of the trip, we were blessed with 150 feet of visibility at Tiger Beach.... Roughly 12 tigers and 30 lemon sharks showed up for the event,

answering our prayers after the rough weather."

In fact many passengers who traverse the Gulf Stream with Abernethy to convene with sharks return to land as born-again converts. They recite the mantra that sharks are mellow creatures worthy of reverence, not bloodthirsty terrors eligible for indiscriminate slaughter.

In a blog entry recounting the events of the *Shear Water's* February 11 sailing, Abernethy introduces some esteemed members of his cast of underwater characters. There's a 14-foot tiger shark named Emma, which Abernethy calls "our superstar." Alas, for the second consecutive week, Emma was a no-show in February. "Hopefully she is off on a very well-deserved vacation after working so hard since we met her a little over four years ago," Abernethy muses. Or perhaps she tired of "working" for fish scraps.

Abernethy adds that his crew had prepared a "special treat" for Emma that they instead gave to a new supermodel they named Angel. Oh, but that Angel sure is a wily one! Abernethy goes on to recount how the new fish made off with a diver's Canon 5D camera — though thankfully not his hand.

That was Abernethy's last post on the blog. But other divers swear they've seen the *Shear Water* out at Tiger Beach, a popular spot in the Bahamas for mingling with sharks. And on the website www.wetpixel.com, underwater photographer Eric Cheng has posted an announcement of an Abernethy-led "expedition" that departs July 19 from Palm Beach County. The eight-night voyage costs \$3,870 and is open to only eight divers.

"We screen our passengers and accept advanced divers with shark-diving experience *only*," Cheng warns. "I hate to have to say this, but please do not book if you are squeamish about using bait to attract sharks. We will absolutely be baiting sharks and do not want to fight with you about the issue."

The trip is one of four coveted underwater photography workshops offered in 2008 by Alex Mustard, a British marine biologist turned award-winning underwater photographer. The website www.amustard.com proclaims that such workshops are run only in collaboration with "first-class partners." The trip with Abernethy, Mustard advises, is sold out. He adds under the heading "News" that, even though a diver was recently bitten on a *Shear Water* charter, the July workshop is expected to ship out as planned.

In the wake of Groh's death, hundreds of divers have flooded the Internet with messages of support for Captain Abernethy. Some people venture that, although they didn't know Markus Groh, they recognize him as a kindred spirit who adored sharks and died doing something he loved. Surely, they argue, Groh would want the dives to continue.

They beg his family members not to allow their grief to morph into hatred for sharks. The divers attest to having been subject to stringent security measures while diving with Abernethy. They thank him profusely for having introduced them to the world of sharks. And they worry that they might never be able to dive on the *Shear Water* with the captain again.

"As an avid shark enthusiast, I had craved having intimate shark encounters like that since I was a young girl," writes a woman who calls herself "sharkdiverheidi." "We do not dive with sharks for a simple adrenaline rush or to thrill-seek, but to realize a connection with nature that few people take the time to experience on land. It is our passion and it cannot be caged."

Adds another diver: "Some won't be satisfied until everyone is bound up on their couch staring at CNN like zombies."

A New York-based nonprofit called Shark Savers, founded in 2007 by a group of divers interested in improving the public image of sharks, began a petition in support of continued shark diving in the Bahamas. Among the signers is Kent Bonde, a 50-year-old diver from Miami Shores who survived a bite from a bull shark while he was spearfishing off Grand Bahama in 2001.

"It was like getting hit by a Mack truck," Bonde remembers. The wound, on his left calf, looked like "a perfect ice-cream scoop all the way down to the bone." As blood filled the water around him, Bonde says, he thought, *Please don't bite me again*. He managed to get to Freeport, and then to Jackson Memorial by air ambulance.

As Bonde lay recovering in the hospital, undergoing six weeks of painful treatments to regenerate tissue on his leg, he decided to get back in the water as soon as possible. Otherwise, he worried he'd acquire an acute fear of sharks. He has since gone on numerous dives with sharks and now considers himself an avid shark conservationist. He gives talks at grade schools, comparing a sea without sharks to a major metropolitan area without garbage pickups — it's a mess.

"They're just like big dogs," Bonde insists. "They swim up to you and say, 'Oops, that's not part of the menu.'"

Markus Groh, however, was not particularly fond of sharks, according to his sister Veronika Groh, a cancer researcher in Seattle. She is troubled by the efforts of self-labeled shark divers to turn her brother into a poster boy for their underwater hobby.

"None of us really understand why he got himself into this," Veronika says. "The friends who went on that trip ... felt extremely uncomfortable from the first day on. They just did not feel safe and unfortunately did not have the guts to say, 'Well, let's get out of this.'"

"He [simply] wanted to spend some time with his friends.... It could have happened skiing or mountain climbing.... All I can say is he didn't want to be [on the boat], and I'm sure he suddenly didn't want to be ... down there."

[Click here](#) to view the slide show of Markus Groh's shark attack on his final dive.