



THE GREAT WHITE SHARK DIVER

William Winram is an IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Oceans Ambassador and freediving world record holder who appears in the upcoming IMAX doco *Great White Shark 3D*. Not only is he an elite diver but he also spends a lot of time hanging with and tagging great whites. We spoke with him about his greatest underwater feats, the nature of apex predators, and the grave threat humans pose to them



Please explain what freediving is. Breath-hold diving, or freediving, is any time you hold your breath and dive under the surface of the water, traditionally in the sea. Humans have been doing it for thousands of years to hunt and gather and to dive for pearls. Two good historical examples are the Ama divers of Japan and the Skandalopetra divers of Greece.

You hold numerous freediving records and distinctions. What feats do you rank among your best? My first encounter with a tiger shark was a clear highlight but another tiger shark encounter I had involved one bumping me while I was taking a sip of water from

a water bottle. She bumped me very gently – and this is a 4m, 500kg animal – and I moved out of the way. Then she returned – and there’s a photo of me face-to-face with her. In terms of records, I’d say swimming “The Arch” without fins [commonly regarded as the world’s most dangerous dive site] in the Blue Hole, north of Dahab, Egypt. Nobody

had ever done it. Sixty metres depth and a 30m passageway at that depth. It was a big dive. And it was nice to cap off the year with a world record [in the category of Variable Weight (VWT), where William achieved a 145m dive].

What’s your day job? I make my living coaching and teaching [diving]. All the tagging [of great white sharks] I do voluntarily – in fact, it usually costs me money. I decided I wanted to contribute something and it turned out the best way was supporting scientists placing tags in a way that’s non-invasive. There are other organisations doing some crazy stuff that ends up killing sharks in the process of attempting to study them. The problem is that a lot of people think I’m crazy, in

that the only reference point they have to sharks is this psychopathic representation of them from the media, so they just think we’re adrenaline junkies.

What’s your involvement in the film? Basically, I’m one of the guys in the film: swimming, diving, tagging, and interacting with the sharks. There is also some voice-over taken from interviews capturing some of my thoughts about great whites and what we do in the water with them.

What’s your favourite thing about great white sharks?

They’re honest. There’s no bullshit. They’re an apex predator, and if you ever forget that, you’ll have problems.

What is the most common misconception people have about sharks?

The most common one is that sharks are mindless killing machines. They’re not that at all. The perception of what we’re doing [tagging great whites for conservation purposes] is that we’re these crazy adrenaline junkies with big balls. For one thing, adrenaline has no place when you’re holding your breath, since that will chew up your oxygen fast. More importantly, if sharks were anything like how they were portrayed in Discovery Channel’s Shark Week or in the film *Jaws*, there’s no way we

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Makes your office job seem a tad dull and shitty, huh?



could do what we're doing – we'd be eaten immediately.

Give us a more accurate portrait of what they're like.

They're very curious but, as I said, they're apex predators as well. They want to explore but are also cautious, since they don't want to get hurt and they also want to gain an advantage. The shark is always looking for an advantage, and this is why they try to approach you from a direction you aren't paying attention to. This is why we constantly look over our shoulders and keep an eye out for sharks other than the ones directly in front of us. Once we make eye contact, the shark knows we have seen them, and therefore taken their advantage away. This generally gives us the advantage and keeps them from slipping into an instinctual mode. If there are no sharks around, we'll start slapping our hands on the surface in a swimming motion, as that tends to attract them. We

don't do it to the point where it bothers them, though. If you've ever meditated, you know that you space out at some point, then refocus, then space out again, and so on. When we're around sharks, we need to be 100 per cent focused. As soon as you're less than 100 per cent, that's when they begin sneaking in and seizing the opportunity to gain an advantage. And that's when we get out of the water. It's a very smart predator.

Do you think the situation for sharks will improve in the near future?

If we keep going the way we are, they're gonna be extinct. Human beings are the biggest threat to all species of sharks. No offense to anyone who has been or knows someone who's been injured or killed by a

shark but I don't support culling. It makes no sense. The ocean isn't ours, so my opinion is that if someone is not prepared to accept the risk, then don't get in. The difference between the sea when I started diving 30 years ago and now is just... holy shit. The level of vitality and abundance has been seriously compromised in the areas I'm familiar with. Science is also aware that an ecosystem collapses when you remove sharks from it.

What's your take on the 'shark as villain' stereotype that appears so often in pop culture and the media?

We've been fighting for more than six years to get an alternative viewpoint in the media but have been thwarted at every turn. We've had people twist our words and sensationalise things and – you can quote me on this – Discovery Channel's Shark Week is the biggest piece of garbage on TV. They don't give a rat's arse about an honest portrayal of these animals – what they care about is dollars and cents and ratings. It's not responsible documentary making at all. I know great whites, and if you dump enough blood in the water and tease them for long enough, you get an animal that's off its rocker. Now, having said that,

I recently spoke with one of the scientists we've supported and apparently he worked with a new producer shooting something for Shark Week – and it seems they might start having more honest and scientifically based programming in the future.

What are some of the future challenges if we want to avoid wiping out sharks?

One of the fundamental challenges we face as human beings is our own ignorance. We honestly believe that this is our planet and that we are the apex predator, so we can do what we want. How arrogant. Something else that's going on is that American collectors want the jaws of 4m great white sharks. Sharks of that length are usually arriving at sexual maturity, so the ones capable of reproducing and maintaining the species are being killed off. Mexican fishermen get \$5,000 for killing and delivering those jaws, while someone is pocketing \$50,000 from the collector.

Daniel Steiner

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>Great White Shark 3D releases at IMAX Melbourne Museum on Jan 2 and IMAX Darling Harbour on January 9

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