

Chapter 8



Ron and Valerie Taylor

Ron and Valerie Taylor: Cavorting with Sharks

*Our interest's
in the dangerous edge
of things.*

— Browning

In October, 1980 my friend Annie Doubilet and I swam at 80 feet along Desco Reef in the clear blue water of the Coral Sea. We could see the white sand bottom below us at 130 feet as we hugged the vertical wall of the drop-off. We inspected the purple corals, the multicolored tropical fishes and the bright little nudibranchs. We were as happy as could be.

Out of nowhere a grey reef shark zoomed in and buzzed us. It swam off into the distance, then turned sharply and came back. Then from the original direction it had come, three more sharks swam in, and all of them began to circle over the open sandy bottom just off the reef. We began to back up—both of us trying awfully hard to make ourselves small.

Before we knew it five sharks, the biggest one about five-and-a-half feet long, were circling and watching us, never going too far out of view. Then a little one, about three feet long, came up from behind in a surprise approach. With this the other sharks began to behave as if a fish had been speared somewhere, swimming erratically in ever tighter circles. As the big one came in for a close pass, we saw mating scars etched all over its back.

By this time our own backs were against the reef and we were trying not to breathe. The sharks continued to circle. We knew that reef sharks are not considered to be man-eating or necessarily all that dangerous, but among

sharks, they are the little nippers with nasty tempers. Like all sharks, they have teeth.

Suddenly the big one turned, came straight as a torpedo at us and didn't veer off until it was just two feet away. We were being dive-bombed!

I signalled to Annie that I had had enough and wanted to clear out. Together we swam up and over the reef wall, into a shallow area that was protected by a number of huge coral heads. Just as we got into the quiet of this subsea lagoon, we bumped smack into an enormous nurse shark, which Annie later guessed to be 12 to 13 feet long. I guessed it to be more like 100 feet long. It was so big it looked like a submarine. I almost swallowed my regulator when I saw it.

We turned to get around the nurse shark, which was never any threat because these sluggish animals just lumber along minding their own business. No sooner had we cleared the shark than we bumped into a sea snake wriggling its way to the surface. Sea snakes are common in the Coral Sea and are said to be docile creatures with gentle natures. However, if one happens to bite you by accident, its venom is more deadly than a cobra's. Annie and I decided then and there to swim back to the boat and call it a day.

Valerie Taylor, fearless shark star of Australia, laughed like mad when she heard our story. Somewhere on the same reef she and her husband Ron had been chumming the waters to get the sharks into a feeding frenzy for a film they were shooting. At the same time, David, Annie's husband, had been chumming the water elsewhere on the same reef because he was photographing frenzied sharks for a *National Geographic* story. The sharks we had seen, said Valerie, were swimming back and forth between the two feeding frenzies, alternating between banquets, and we were just meeting them in the middle. Valerie laughed all over again at the very thought of it.

I was in Australia for a second time, and on assignment for *National Geographic*. My story was not on sharks, but on diving the deep, freshwater holes of South Australia. David was to photograph the adventure and I'd write it, but first he had to wind up his two-year shark assignment. That meant I got to go to the Coral Sea with a boatload of chum (fish guts) and film, and watch sharks get stirred into a snapping frenzy.

The Doubilets and I had met the Taylors in Rockhampton, a coastal town of Australia. Together we motored to Yeppoon where the boat *Coralita* was berthed. Ron and Valerie had been responsible for more films about sharks than just about anyone in the world. They were the principal divers and camera people in the box-office hit *Blue Water-White Death*, a cinematic search for the great white shark. They shot the underwater sequences of *Jaws* and *The Blue Lagoon* as well. Ron has the distinction of being the first man in world to film the great white shark underwater without the use of cages.



Photo by Peter Lake

Valerie Taylor

For the Coral Sea trip the Taylors brought along their revolutionary shark-proof suit made of a heavy metallic mesh which resembled, depending on one's sense of romance, either the chain mail of ancient knights or a fireplace curtain. It weighed about 15 pounds. Valerie was to wear it, offer herself up to the sharks and get bitten while Ron filmed it all. If everything went well, the sharks would chomp on her arms, legs and other body parts, and Valerie would come out unscathed. Valerie, a beautiful, blue-eyed blonde, wears lacy blouses with frilly collars. She hardly seems the type to get into a round of fisticuffs with sharks. Looks are deceiving. Valerie lives to tangle with the beasts. On this trip she could hardly wait to get started.

David and the Taylors were both after sharks in feeding frenzies, but their projects were separate and conflicting. Therefore, two simultaneous frenzies a day were required. Each day the two groups loaded cameras, chum and dive gear aboard their respective skiffs and headed out for their separate spots on the reef.

At Desco Reef Annie and I had gone off on our own exploring tour. That's when we were dive-bombed by territorial sharks travelling between frenzies.

I was not all that accustomed to sharks and, therefore, when I saw for myself how Valerie handled them, I was stunned. Our first day of diving had been on



An aggressive and hungry shark approaches the diver's cage.

Photo by Ron Taylor

Swain's Reef, at the edge of the Coral Sea. When we got in the water the Taylors' assistant, Alexander, began to spear fish.

The sharks in the area, already attracted by our boat, circled around like curious dogs. As the fish were speared, they speeded up their circling. When they began to attack the speared fish, Valerie moved in to where they were feeding. She was not wearing her shark suit for these dives—the shark suit was, at this point, a secret, even from us.

Sharks are strong, muscular missiles equipped with ragged, razor-sharp teeth. They rip and tear, turn on a dime and are fiercely territorial. If they think you are a threat to them or to their chosen area, watch out! I remembered an old tip from California shark expert Don Nelson, who said that when a shark is ready to attack, its pectoral fins drop down. I found myself watching the pectoral fins of every shark I saw.

Valerie, on the other hand, loves sharks and pays no attention to pectoral fin angles. With tuna in her arms, she swam into the middle of these animals—now vibrating from side to side with the fury of the feast—and offered her hand-held bait to them. They turned from the speared fish and went for her. She proceeded to tease them, feed them, push them off with the fish and her fists. She managed to keep high the sharks' excitement for a considerable length of time.

It is astounding how quickly man becomes accustomed to situations that greatly unnerve him at the outset. Something awesome or frightful becomes

acceptable, either because as a survival reflex humans instinctively calm their inner senses, or because the senses become dulled by extremes or violence. One thing is certain: excitement, no matter what its cause, even if induced by momentary fear, can be like an enslaving drug in that the excited senses want more. In other words, once you've cavorted with sharks, you're not quite as content with the slow and hapless nudibranch.

As uneasy as I felt around the sharks, I found myself wanting to see more.

Sometimes a diver won't see a shark but the shark will see the diver, and that is unpleasant to think about. Valerie explained that a shark will not usually come in for a bite (unless it's a great white). Instead, if it feels threatened, it comes in for a bump, ramming a diver with its snout to signal that the territory is not the diver's but the shark's. If the diver fails to heed the bump, then the shark may well come around for a little nip.

This particular piece of information was not very reassuring to me the afternoon Annie and I were diving on a reef seldom explored. Visibility was not good that day so we swam shallow, at about 30 feet. Around the end of the reef I heard a voice, but it was so indistinct that I thought I was hearing things. I turned around anyway, and the very act of my turning around frightened off a five-foot grey reef shark at my shoulder. It was Annie's voice I had heard. She had been yelling underwater at the top of her lungs. She later told me that the shark had made a beeline toward me as if it planned to bump me good and hard, and that I had scared it at the last minute by turning around. Because I am not Valerie Taylor by a long shot, this whole experience made my knees quake.

Four days into the expedition Valerie decided to try out the mesh suit in an area called Action Point on Marion Reef. Action Point is so named because of the way sharks behave there. Annie and I looked askance at our own suits because they looked like puny rubber outfits compared to the serious metallic mesh Valerie wore.

However, we were still intact at the end of our dive, and we were back aboard the *Coralita* waiting for the Taylors to return. When Valerie climbed aboard, we saw that her chin was black and blue. There were two holes where a shark had bitten her, leaving the tips of its teeth lodged in her jaw.

Valerie had been bitten in the head by a shark! It was mind-boggling.

"I felt a tremendous hit," said Valerie. "At the same time, the teeth hit the mesh of the suit and there was a crunching, grating sound and it was right across my ears. It sounded like it was tearing off my face." She reported this the way some people might tell their friends about going to the grocery store.

I asked Ron, who was filming the whole thing, what he had seen. "I didn't know Valerie had been hit until she went to the surface and I could see blood coming out from underneath her chin," he said. "When I'm filming, I'm not

looking at the specific detail of what's happening. I'm framing, getting all the action in the frame. I never know what detail I've got until I look at the work print on the editing machine."

Ron and Valerie take such accidents in stride because it is part of the hazardous work they have chosen to do. They make a close team, for where one is, the other is close behind. Ron is the quiet one, the meditator, the thinker, the inventor. Valerie is the mover, the one who makes the business deals and keeps a shark's eye on business. The extent of her dedication to what they are trying to do could be measured by her final reaction to being bitten in the head. She smiled about it.

"It just goes to show that the shark suit really works," she said. "If the mesh had covered my chin, I reckon I wouldn't have these teeth in my jaw, now, would I?"

Later, as everyone aboard the *Coralita* slept, Valerie told me about her early experiences in the sea. What began as a hobby led her to extraordinary underwater adventures and a career that pays her well for doing what she loves best. A good career is often the marriage of avocation and occupation—hobby and job—so that work doesn't seem so much like work. A necessary ingredient to this union, however, is an unusual, individualistic approach to one's interests. In Valerie's case, it's been an unusual affinity for all sea creatures, an understanding of them on their own terms, never exploiting them or dramatizing danger by being around them. Valerie often has been a cool, abiding presence in the midst of gore, a tiny human face to face with danger.

Her career reached its present high-voltage level in 1969 with her participation in the cinematic hunt for the great white shark. She was the only woman amid a team of photographers and hordes of frenzied sharks in the box-office hit *Blue Water-White Death*, filmed during 1969 and 1970 in various oceans of the world. Armed with bangsticks, she rode shotgun over the men who were filming thousands of gnashing teeth. The expedition had been put together by American filmmaker and producer Peter Gimbel, whose goal was to search for, find and film the great white shark.

"Whitey," as the great fish is called, was most appropriately described in 1862 by Jonathan Couch, who wrote in his *Fishes of the British Islands*:

It is to sailors the most formidable of all the inhabitants of the sea, for in none besides are the powers of inflicting injury so equally combined with the eagerness to accomplish it.¹

Although the Gimbel expedition subjected divers to extreme hazards, they were all motivated by one thing: to capture for the first time underwater footage



Photo by Ron Taylor

Dinghy and diver are quite close to a travelling shark (above), and the shark (below) becomes quite interested in Valerie Taylor and the prospect of another meal.

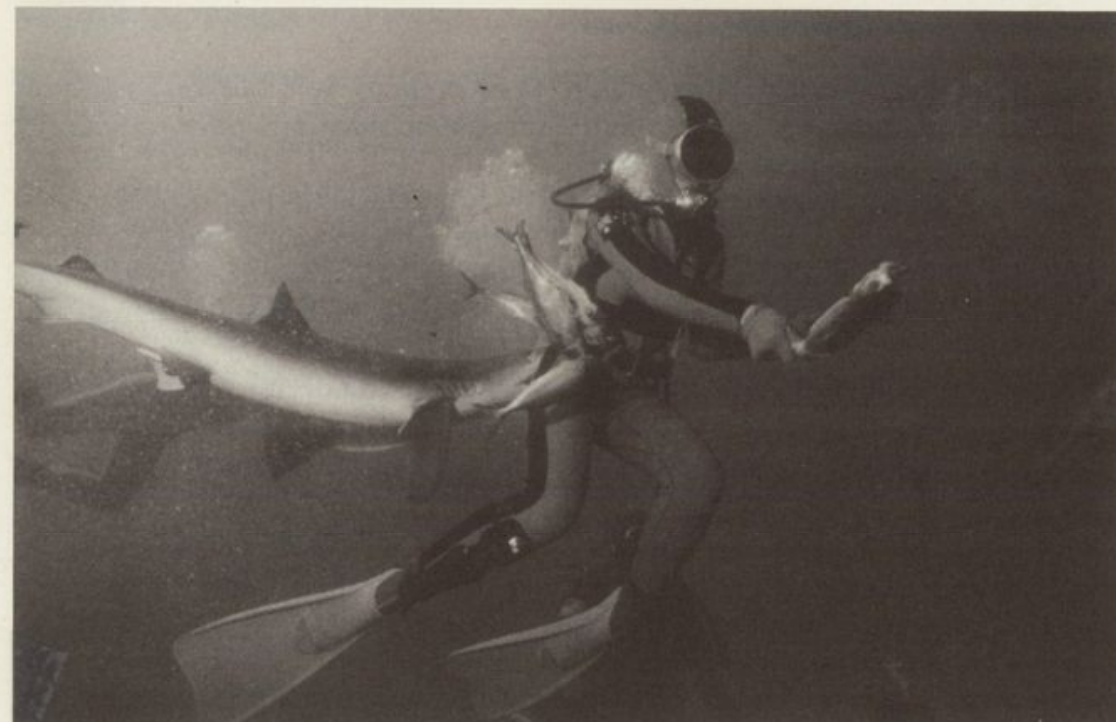


Photo by Ron Taylor



Photo by Ron Taylor

Valerie Taylor's mesh suit is her protection from a biting shark.

of Whitey. Valerie had gone along simply to accompany Ron, but she ended up being the most unusual star of the film—unusual because one does not usually see an angel in such harrowing situations.

Born in Sydney, Australia in 1936, Valerie has been diving for over 30 years. Because her parents had a waterfront home, she found it easy to begin snorkeling. She began spearfishing and by 1963 had won the Australian Women's Spearfishing Open Championship three times. The last competition she entered was in 1968.

"I realized that spearfishing was a bad thing," she said. "It really is. They get boatloads of all kinds of fish and most are wasted. Ron and I noticed how the fish life became depleted as more and more people began spearfishing, and we stopped."

Ron Taylor is a veteran underwater filmmaker and, when the Taylors quit spearfishing, they both turned to making a living in underwater photography. For Ron's photographs and films, Valerie often played with sea animals in an attempt to bring them closer to Ron's lens, and also to understand the animals better.

The Taylors found their new career rough going at first, because at the time no one in Australia seemed interested in sea films. Their first break came when



Photo by Peter Lake

The sharks here clearly outnumber Valerie Taylor.

the Belgium University at Liege hired them for a six-month scientific expedition to the Great Barrier Reef. Then when Peter Gimbel put together his expedition to film the great white, the Taylors were natural choices. Ron had already filmed white sharks—without cages—and he had captured some of the most dramatic and exciting footage of these animals ever recorded. He agreed to join the expedition on the condition that Valerie could accompany him. The group consisted of Gimbel, filmmaker Stan Waterman, Peter Matthiessen (author of the book, *Blue Meridian*, about the expedition), still photographer Peter Lake, topside cameraman Jim Lipscomb, sound man Stuart Cody, production manager Phil Clarkson, key grip Tom Chapin, and the Taylors. They met aboard the whale catcher *Terrier* and set out for the Indian Ocean.

Valerie kept a daily journal, which Matthiessen referred to as he wrote his book. In her journal, Valerie describes how she hung suspended in a black sea on a black night in a cage surrounded by sharks. The sharks had come in to feed on a whale carcass that was slung alongside the *Terrier*. Gimbel was filming the action from the cage he shared with Valerie, while Ron and Stan Waterman worked from another cage. The sea was rough. A huge, fifteen-foot tiger shark appeared. Its head was almost three feet wide. It made a beeline toward one of

the 5,000-watt lights hanging 45 feet below Valerie's cage. It swallowed the entire lamp and spat it out.

The rough seas created a more serious problem: the electrical lines of the cages began to cross and tangle. When the two cages banged together, their tethers became tangled, putting the divers in a precarious spot. She wrote:

Our cage-tethering rope was longer than the power cable, and it took all my time and strength to keep hold of the thing. We were tied to the *Terrier*, which didn't help matters much. Her rise and fall was ten times that of the whale. Peter, realizing my difficulty, helped me pull a length of cable into the cage and hook it around a valve on the far cylinder. This put a big strain on the valve, but we managed to shoot and light a few scenes before the strain became so great as to endanger the cage.²

Finally Valerie and Peter lost their lights altogether as they pulled completely away from the cage. Ron and Stan had problems of their own. Their light cable had entangled around the whale. From there it had wrapped around the buoyancy tanks of Valerie's and Peter's cage. They lost their lights, too. On the surface, Stuart Cody saw the problem and cut the cages free of the ship before proceeding to untangle the twisted mess of cables. Sharks continued to swarm outside.

In the cage, we didn't realize our predicament. We just sat there waiting. I wondered why we weren't able to see the whale anymore and why our light had faded and why I couldn't hear the heart of the ship beating away. I didn't realize that we were no longer tethered to anything but just drifting freely at night, surrounded by feeding sharks.³

Cody got the tangle straightened and secured the cages to the *Terrier*. The lights came back on. Almost immediately a nine-foot whitetip shark became ensnared in the cables on top of Valerie's cage. As it thrashed around, she and Peter were buffeted from side to side like a pair of dice. The shark twisted its way free. But before any of them could think of what to do next, both cages drifted into the whale.

Ribbons of mutilated intestines streamed through the bars as the cages clanged together where the sharks had opened the whale's body. Ron was wrestling to keep his cage free from the jaw bone. I couldn't see him for the blood and gore. It turned the scene into sort of raw soup. Although it was impossible, I thought I was breathing and tasting the stuff. I don't know how we ever got free of the whale, but I know that it was so pleasant to be away from that torn, smelling hulk that I felt happy.⁴

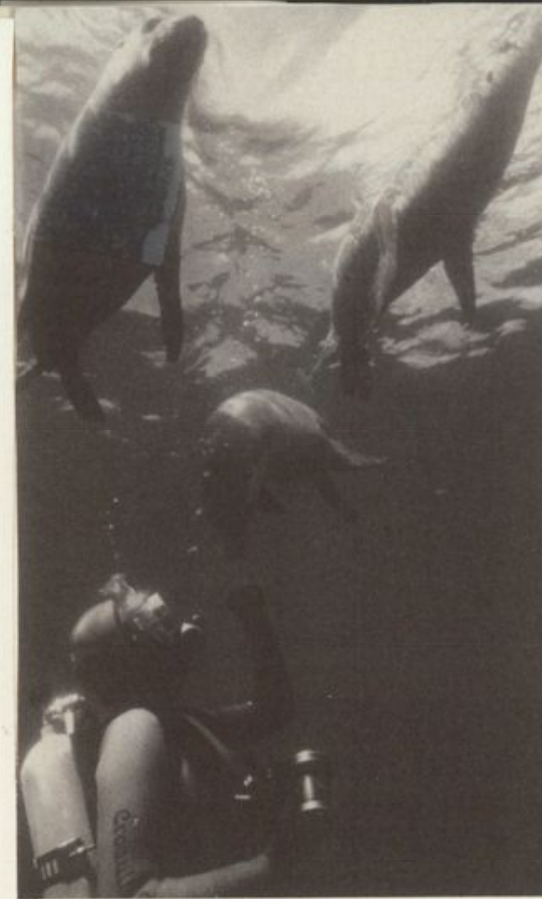


Photo by Ron Taylor

A visit with an octopus and sea lions can be friendlier than a visit with sharks.

By this time Peter and Stan, in their different cages, were running out of air. The Zodiac picked up Stan and Ron from their cage and, as they left the water, the sharks attacked the cables with renewed frenzy.

"Then suddenly, without warning," Valerie wrote, "a tremendous shock vibrated through our cage. Peter and I had drifted into the ship's hull." As both cages crashed against the *Terrier* in the rough seas, Valerie and Peter were freed from its confines. "I couldn't vacate the darn thing fast enough," Valerie said.⁵

This brush with disaster would seem more than enough, but the drama was outdone by an even more dire situation that left those who took part in it in a state of disbelief even to this day. On May 4, 1969, in a spot off Durban, South Africa, while looking for Whitey, the group chummed the open ocean with dead whale from the *Terrier* and waited for action. Soon the waters were churning with about 200 sharks. The men prepared the cages and were ready to enter the water when Peter Gimbel announced that he was going to get out of his cage once they submerged. Valerie knew she would follow his lead, but not without trepidation.

I looked at all those sharks swimming around; it was a very nice day, the sun was shining, and I thought: Well, today we are all going to get killed. I stood there on the deck and looked about at the crew and thought about

everything—about my nephews and nieces back in Australia that I loved so much and the rest of the family. I thought: Have a good look at everything, because I don't think I'll get out of the cage and survive.⁶

Then, in their cages, they entered the water. Valerie watched sharks tear big chunks out of the whale. Blood poured from their gills as they gulped and thrashed around with whale guts hanging from their mouths. Valerie felt no fear, she said, only excitement.

Then Peter swam out of the cage he shared with Valerie. She didn't close the door at first, but sat on the floor of the cage thinking she would actually see him killed right then and there. But she felt she would have to help him. The sharks began to bump him around and Peter beat them off with his camera. Stan Waterman left his cage. Peter, always the gentleman, returned and led Valerie out into the open. Soon they were all beating off the sharks, making themselves accepted as other marine creatures that had come to feed on the whale.

Valerie's ability to make herself as one with marine creatures has led her into a number of dramatic situations. It also made her a dynamic subject of the underwater camera. She hates killing anything in the sea, even sharks. She is happiest when she can pet moray eels on the head, play with an octopus or feed barracuda by hand. She has an uncanny way of befriending sea creatures, and she uses it when she's in front of the camera, as well as when she is behind it.

"I always seem to end up with a couple of marine creatures who are my friends," she said. "This is one of my greatest pleasures, having a fish swim up and look at me with curiosity and we have a little conversation. Every living thing has feelings. So I give all the corals, shells and fish their due; they're busy getting along, busy in their little ways. I figure if I'm nice to them, they will be nice to me."⁷

Valerie once had two moray eels for friends, nicknamed Harry and Fang. They knew her and she always carried something for them to eat when she went to see them. She often picked up Harry, who was as big as she is, and took him to the surface to show him to people sitting in the boat. Harry bit two photographers, however, and Valerie thought it was because they handled him too roughly.

Valerie has been featured on the covers of national magazines, once with an octopus sitting on her head, and again holding a poisonous sea snake. While she appears to be totally fearless, she admits that she is often afraid. Curiosity is what motivates her, and her curiosity reached its peak when the *Blue Water-White*

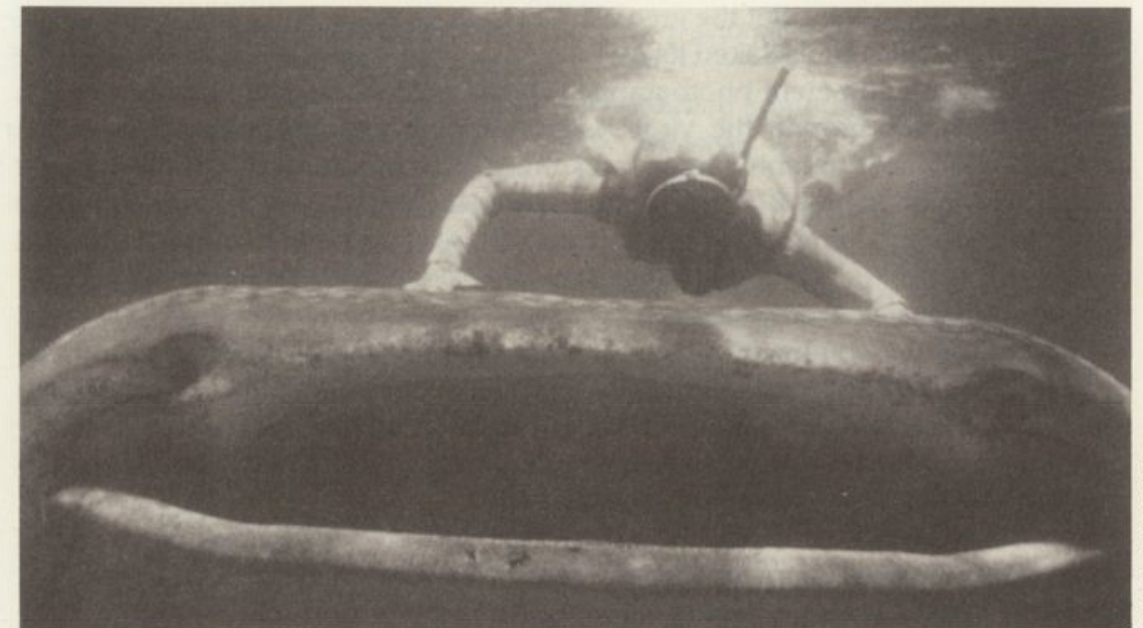


Photo by Ron Taylor

A three and one-half hour frolic with the giant whale shark (above) requires far less protection than does a visit with the great white (below).

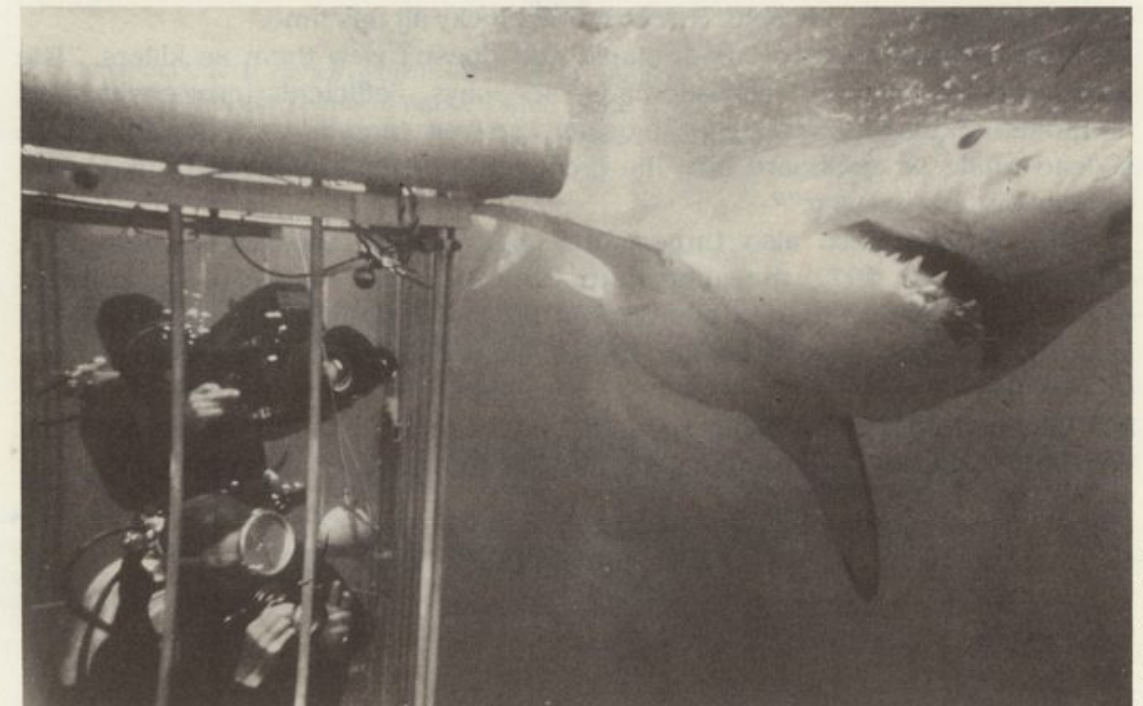


Photo by Ron Taylor

Death expedition finally met the great white shark. As the killer swam by her cage, Valerie reached out and stroked its belly.

Valerie is a competent photographer. In the past, Time-Life has used her to shoot still photos around the Virgin Islands for its wilderness series. She has written books, most notably *Underwater World*. She has starred in both U.S. and foreign television series. Both above and below the water she and Ron filmed all of the live shark segments for *Jaws* (I and II). Among their notable Hollywood credits are the films *Orca* and *Blue Lagoon*. Today, they continue to film for various countries all over the world.

When asked if she has trouble making a living in what is considered a male-dominated field, Valerie says that she doesn't. "I seem to have some sort of sixth sense about fish and other animals. I seem to know if I can approach a shark or if I should be out of the water. Some people think I'm not afraid. Sometimes I'm awfully afraid, but I have a tremendous curiosity."⁸

In the summer of 1981, Ron and Valerie were diving off the coast of California, near San Clemente Island, as part of a short segment for the ABC television series, *Those Amazing Animals*. The waters were chummed for blue sharks. Eventually they came in and Valerie went diving with them. As she was watching a shark swim above her head, another blue shark came up from below and bit her leg. Back on deck, Valerie viewed her wound with a philosophical calm. "I asked for it," she said. "I've been very lucky all this time."

Valerie disapproves of shark-mania and doesn't view them as killers. "The great white is nature's garbageman," she says, "efficient, inexpensive and nonpolluting. His job is to keep the ocean free from large masses of garbage. Be it dead whale or cardboard box, the great white devours all, leaving the ocean cleaner with his passing."⁹

The Taylors have also turned their attention to the matter of marine conservation. In 1971 they began to work through Australian government channels to create a marine preserve on the Great Barrier Reef, in an area off Lizard Island. The area, which the Taylors named the Cod Hole, was full of big, friendly fish called potato cods, a type of grouper. When Ron and Valerie saw the fish they had befriended being speared, they began to petition the government. Today the Cod Hole is a marine park, and Valerie was given a government award

for her efforts in establishing it. Her real reward, she said, is in the fact that her fish friends can live out their lives in peace.

In May, 1987 Valerie sent me a letter containing some advice she wanted to pass on to those just starting out in the field. She says:

It's a hard road to start from nothing as we did. I think the most important thing is to not expect too much in the beginning. We get letters, hundreds of them, all the time from all over the world from young people wanting to do what we do. They want to come and work with us, shooting film, diving, travelling. No one has ever written offering to fill tanks, carry cameras, mash bait, sort slides, clean the boat, wash the dishes. They don't seem to realize how much time (15 years actually) we spent selling fish around camping areas, spearing fish for commercial companies and putting on our own underwater shows just to get the money to buy film. It doesn't happen like magic. You must always deliver the goods, even if it costs you, and you can't expect too much. Be grateful for what little you get. Do everything with a smile.¹⁰

Notes

1. Jonathan Couch, *Fishes of the British Islands*, 1862 (out of print).
2. From the personal journal of Valerie Taylor, 1969.
3. Peter Matthiessen, *Blue Meridian* (Random House: New York, 1971), pp. 73-74.
4. *Op. cit.*, Valerie Taylor's journal.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. Personal communication to Hillary Hauser from Valerie Taylor.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Interview of Valerie Taylor by Hillary Hauser, August 1981.
10. Letter from Valerie Taylor to Hillary Hauser, May 25, 1987.

Suggested Reading

Valerie Taylor, "A Jawbreaker for Sharks" (*National Geographic Magazine*, May 1981).
 Ron & Valerie Taylor, *Underwater World* (Ure Smith: Sydney, 1976).
 Peter Matthiessen, *Blue Meridian* (Random House: New York, 1971).
 Richard Ellis, *The Book of Sharks* (Grosset & Dunlap: New York, 1976).