



## COW SHARKS IN THE KELP

Simonstown, South Africa

by Tom Walmsley

I am sitting on the bottom of the sea, in giant kelp forest, off the southern tip of Africa. I am wearing good quality diving gear for cold, oceanic water but I can still feel this group of excited sea creatures bumping and scraping into me from every quarter. My dive buddy is pointing continuously at something over my shoulder that I should be aware of. For now I am happy that all these cat sharks, pyjama sharks and baby puff adder sharks appeared calm enough to let me interact in their territory. They are allowing me to stroke their bellies, eye ball them from a few centimetres and pause long enough for close up shots of their stunning markings. This silent kelp forest, with mood lighting from filtered sunlight, and psychedelic coloured creatures and corals on the sea floor, seems calm enough.



My wife and children are on the hot, dry land, too young to dive (yet!), but I am spending some time with my old fraternity. I used to be a wildlife explorer guide and underwater cameraman, taking people and cameras underwater in areas where we could encounter rare or impressive wildlife, no matter how hard it was to get there. These waters off Cape Town are the stomping ground of two special photographers, [Thomas Peschak](#) and [Morne Hardenberg](#). Both have strong roots on the seabed here but are in such demand for their skills and attitude to photographing sharks that they are often away on expeditions. And so it was that I found myself at New Year with some local and entertaining professional divers, who I had never met before from SharkExplorers.com.



We knew it would involve luck to find the big shark in the kelp forest, the cow shark. Sadly we were not going to be lucky enough to see great white sharks in these waters but we have all spent some time free diving with them and hold them with the greatest respect. They are a breed apart from other sharks with more sensitive skin and slightly warm blood and complex social hierarchies.



Cow sharks are special because they are from the family of sharks with 6 gills, the hexanchoid sharks. The rest of this group live in very deep water, kilometres deep. They can grow up to 50 feet long. This population of Cow sharks lives by the sun baked coastline by Simonstown, in stunning kelp forest, as you

now know. However their most interesting aspect is that they have not evolved much for 200 million years. This is apparent from their more primitive physical characteristics and senses which affects their attitude to their surroundings. They appear as though they are happily swimming around in the dark and, although they need to keep moving for their gills to work, they have worked how to use the minimal amount of effort. In foraging mode, they reminded me of old computers with very selective processing power – focussing mainly on two senses: smells and electrical fields. In feeding mode they could power up their sensory perception and come into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century surprisingly quickly. They are also known as Bluntnose sharks for good reason as they have very unfortunate facial features. The bottom line though, is that they have more close relatives in the fossil record than living relatives. Face to face this leaves you feeling that you are diving with a dinosaur - a real live, hungry dinosaur.



So finally I turned round and there was nothing behind me. But the bulky Cow shark soon returned to cruise over our base - in an opening in the kelp, on the sandy bottom. It swam quite high in the water column so it dragged its shadow over me and then disappeared again. It was big individual, a lot bigger than me, but its body form was drawn out towards its tail, as if stretched by time. Over the next few dives I enjoyed nearly 20 passes and even found one shark trying to chew my camera - probably due to the electrical signals it was giving off (best use of a camera in meltdown). I was able to swim alongside it and found that my respect for its aged characteristics grew stronger with every minute I stayed with it. It was clear though that you connect with this shark by looking at its history and deep into its inky black eyes but you don't try to interact or make contact with it. They live on a different time scale. And probably prefer not to get involved with mortal beings wearing lots of 'clever' diving equipment.



All photographs by Tom Walmsley on a kids camera in a waterproof case.