

ENCOUNTERS

by Michael Morris

September 19, 1996

My friend Richard and I have a kayak fishing trip planned. I want to get an early (sunrise) start but Richard will be late so we agree to meet at a spot we call "Jumpin' Jack rock" about three miles north of our launch in Trinidad Harbor in Northern California (Humboldt County) at around 11:30 a.m. I fish my way North and at a spot we optimistically call "Fish Alley", about half-way to J.J. rock and 1/4 mi. offshore, I hook what feels like a big lingcod on my deep water rig. Whatever it was spits out the jig and I paddle up a little to repeat the drift. As I'm making another pass with rod and line off the port side I see a large dark barn door shape rising from the depths to starboard. Having earlier in the summer been on a charter trip and seen two near 70lb halibut hauled in my first thought (nonsensically) was, "A Pacific Halibut, wonder if he'll take my jig!" This unrealistic and overenthusiastic spasm lasted only an instant as a large dorsal and caudal fin emerged from the water and I was able to see the grey upper side and white underside of a very large shark pass three or four feet from the side of my boat and then felt and heard the "bump, bump" as dorsal and caudal fin passed under the bow.

I had seen enough National Geographic specials to know a Great White shark. I was paddling a Necky Narpa (plastic, blue) that is 16.5 feet long. While I was not in a position or frame of mind to take accurate measurements it appeared the fish was around the same length as my boat.

My plans for landing a record lingcod shelved, I quickly reeled in and loosely (and rather loudly) stowed my rod on deck, pulled my paddle out, and sat ready (for what?). The shark swam at the surface to about 30ft off the port bow. Perhaps the thumping from my clumsily stowing my rod caught its attention, perhaps not, but it circled counter clockwise and made a pass along my port side close enough for me to stab at its face/eyes with my trusty Werner Little Dipper. (My paddle being my only "weapon" and lacking any other good strategies) Again the shark headed off my port bow and I breathed a sigh of relief at having fended off this large predator. Then it circled back counter-clockwise again. The phrase, "We have a situation here" ran through my head.

Now I was getting a little peeved. Was this going to go on all day? There are not a lot of options in a case like this - scramble out on a wash rock and get washed off and eaten, out-paddle a shark to shore? Where was Richard, I'm pretty sure I could out-paddle him! Okay sharky, you want some of me? Bring it on!

Once again it passed "bump, bump" dorsal and caudal under my bow and down along my starboard and once again I stabbed with my paddle. I have no idea whether I landed any blows. It then passed behind and down out of sight towards open water. I sat still with paddle held out ready to brace in case a big blow came from below, hoping I might be able to stay upright. After an uneventful period of maybe five minutes I began to paddle smoothly and watchfully south to meet Richard. I caught sight of him soon and we met and talked over my little encounter.

I have had adrenaline rushes and pounding heart experiences - I know what that feels like and I had neither sensation during this episode. The whole experience was very matter-of-fact, almost out of body. However, for a long while afterwards any swirl, buoy, or piece of kelp drifting into my peripheral vision had me leaping out of my skin.

Richard and I decided, basically, that there are sharks out here and there wasn't much we could do about it. If we wanted to kayak and fish we'd just have to share the place with them. We headed north and fished for the rest of the day returning late.

9/21/99 Three years and three days since the "Big Encounter"

Richard and I are again fishing north of Trinidad in a cove just south of Palmer's Point in Patrick's Point State Park. There's maybe a four or five foot swell running. We're fishing about fifty yards apart when I hear Richard yell at me. (He yells, "fin" but I hear it as "fish" and yell back, "catch it") I paddle over to see what's up and he describes getting a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye near his boat. "Could have been a fin" We decide it was probably a sea lion flipper (Stellar's and California all around). We go back to fishing. Ten minutes later as I rise on a swell I see 100yds ahead the profile of a Great White cruising the surface. I lose sight as I drop into the trough. When I come up again it's gone.

This time Richard and I are interested in seeing the shark again and getting a better look! We stop fishing and go shark watching but to no avail.

This encounter begs the question, "How many times have they checked us out before without our seeing them?" Richard had a bare glimpse of "something" out of the corner of his eye. If I hadn't been facing in just the right direction at just the right time I would have seen nothing and we'd have been oblivious to the presence of this impressive creature.

9/25/03 Something about the latter half of September

A foggy day but beautiful smooth water, no wind and only a three foot swell if that. I paddle into Tractor Cove (so named for a lingcod Michael Harris once caught from shore there, "pulled like a tractor") a small inlet a mile or so north of Trinidad. I paddle the perimeter enjoying being among the rocks only 10 to 20 yards from shore. I stop at the north side of the cove and toss in my jig and catch a black rockfish and toss it back. Another cast back over my left shoulder and I start to retrieve. There are lots (dozen or more) of harbor seals in this cove. To my right, about thirty to fifty feet off, one is in the water next to a rock looking right at me. As I watch a large grey and white shape rises out along the rock followed by a dorsal and caudal fin I recognize and the seal is engulfed. I believe I said something along the lines of, "Holy Poop!" There is a thrashing of tail and a lot of blood in the water. I reel in my line, stow my rod, and pull out my paddle. I watch, amazed.

Having seen some shark kill footage from the Farallon Islands I'm not too worried about my situation. Out there, researchers get right close to feeding sharks in inflatable boats to tag and

observe and film. The sharks are interested in taking care of business and that business is feeding on the kill.

Every few seconds there is thrashing underwater and the shark appears at the surface and more blood stains the water. A few of these thrashings and surges come in my direction and I begin to smoothly back away. A few more surges bring the action towards me again and I decide I've been close and seen enough. I back out some more and quietly turn and head out of the cove. I stop a few more times to look back but the meal seems to be over. Big shark, little seal - probably three or four gulps. I never did see the body of the seal after the initial hit. I'm rather hoping the shark is full and satisfied for the time being.

I had planned on fishing/paddling a few more miles north but I decide this has been enough excitement for me today and head for home.

All these encounters have been humbling and very special and, I'm sure, very rare. I have been very privileged and blessed to view and even be touched by one of the most awesome predators on the planet. That said, enough is enough and I would be perfectly satisfied to not meet any more great white sharks again. However, I'm not going to avoid paddling the ocean because there are sharks out there because there are sharks out there and I want to keep paddling. Sharks are highly evolved predators. It seems to me it's not in their survival interest to go losing teeth or worse by slamming into large floating objects on the sea surface. Investigate, sure.

In thirteen years of paddling I have had a lot of memorable times on the water. I have witnessed probably half a dozen truly humbling or awe inspiring events including encounters with whales, sea lions, jelly fish congregations or just amazing sea conditions. The first and last shark encounters are among these.

In a way I am inclined to take these as visitations from a great and powerful totem spirit of the sea. I am much honored and very appreciative. In any case I will continue to return more fish than I keep as an offering of peace and respect to the ocean.

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9/05