

DIVE WITH THE GREAT WHITE SHARK

BY ISABELLE CROIZEAU



It is a dream, a challenge, or an anguish. But diving with the great white shark leaves no one indifferent. From South Africa to the waters of Guadalupe (Mexico), via southern Australia, the landscapes change, the thrill remains. We asked François Sarano, scientific advisor to the film Oceans, but also to Commander Cousteau for nearly 13 years, to share his experience with us. "The rule," he said, "is precisely that there is no rule: at sea with wild animals, anything can happen. We must remain vigilant and respectful."

Side by side with the great white shark

Remember those images from the movie Oceans: A huge, massive, pot-bellied white shark, over five meters tall, walks into the field. And a man joins him. Side by side, side to side or almost, the predator and the diver move away together into the blue. The diver is François Sarano. His experience of animals, and of course sharks, he has forged over decades, with humility, rubbing shoulders with what all the oceans count for alive. And of those magical moments in Guadalupe, he keeps a special memory.

"In Guadalupe, says François, the fact of diving into the blue creates an intimacy with the animal that one does not feel, for example in South Africa". Shark and diver come face to face, with nothing around, no landmarks, and the situation gives the meeting a special flavor. Suspended in open water, with a visibility that can reach 40 meters on certain days, the moment is magical. And the animals here can be very big, exceed five meters in length, and above all be very pot-bellied, massive. In general, the youngest and therefore the smallest get the ball rolling at the start of the season in August, joined a little later in the fall by the larger ones, often large females.

During the filming of Oceans, the special conditions in the waters of Guadalupe of course conditioned the choice of the film crew. The weather is generally good, the sea relatively calm, and visibility often good, which makes it easier to take pictures and dive in general. The island, located in the Pacific, 240 kilometers from the west coast of Baja California in Mexico, is on the route of the Great Whites, who seem to travel from California to Hawaii every year, and then take the opposite route.



At the dawn of knowledge

"But we still know very little about the great whites," says François. If we try to follow the movements of certain populations, in particular with satellite transmitters, the information collected is necessarily fragmentary and the generalities that we draw from it cannot be certain.

For example, a beacon made it possible to locate a Grand Blanc at 700 meters deep, but there is no evidence that some individuals do not go deeper. And François Sarano, with regard to their approach, wants to keep the same caution: even those like him who have crossed their path several times, whether in Guadalupe or elsewhere, can ultimately base their experience only on a few hours, all the way through, plus a few days of observation. "With a few rare exceptions, like an André Hartmann who has been snorkeling with them in South Africa for years, admits François, we all have limited experience"

And it is for this reason that each situation must be assessed with humility. "The diver, insists François Sarano, remains the first parameter of the case". Of course, animals have their own behavior, and depending on the day and the individual, they are more or less calm, or on the contrary more unpredictable. But the diver's envy, his fear or, on the contrary, his confidence, condition the sequence of events. And considering leaving the cage, of course, is only possible when all the parameters are met: envy, the calm of the animals, and the quality of the visibility. It is impossible to leave with a preconceived idea of your dive. "There is no rule, insists François Sarano, you have to feel things, and assess the situation at a specific moment". And don't play hot-head and unconsciousness.

Patience and listening

"On the other hand," François continues, "encounters with these big predators bring peace, harmony that the artificial world of cities and the virtual world of our computers cannot offer us. They show why wild, untamed and free life is essential to us."

Encountering Great White Sharks assumes, as with all animals, requires a certain amount of patience. Baited with a species of fish juice that their sense of smell allows them to spot from several miles away, it can take several hours for large predators to approach boats. "But, explains François, it has never happened to me not to see them at all in a day". Small underwater cameras can spot them as soon as they arrive, and therefore enjoy the spectacle.

A shoot in November

François Sarano and René Heuzey must set sail for the clear waters of Guadalupe next November. They are preparing for a new shoot, and this time they are taking with them a dozen privileged people who will share a few days of shooting. Of course, this will mean letting the filmmakers dive first, as soon as the animals are near the boat. But the immersions being almost on the surface, long hours of observation and emotion will then await their traveling companions.

