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Shark conservationist David McGuire addresses Earth Day Festival

By Jean Bartlett
Web

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David McGuire, MPH, Director and F and shark conservation nonprofit Sea Stewards and the Shark Stewards project, is also a published author, journalist, documentarian and underwater cinematographer. He won an Emmy for his film work on "Reefs to Rainforests." He has been a captain, filmmaker and master diver on numerous research voyages. The marine biologist is a Research Associate in the Department of Aquatic Biology at the California Academy of Sciences.

McGuire is the keynote speaker at the Pacifica Beach Coalition's Earth Day Environmental Festival, which begins at 11:30 a.m., in the South Lot at Linda Mar Beach. It follows PBC's Earth Day "action" event which starts at 9 a.m. Other speakers include Sea Shepherd's Lincoln Shaw, and Tom Lantos Tunnels hero Dr. Mike Vasey. This year PBC has dedicated its Earth Day events to the endangered "Sharks of the Sea."

McGuire, who has been a beach kid since growing up north of LA, not far from the point break "Topanga," said that once he started surfing, "the die was cast." The ocean became his passion.

"Ever since that first plunge, I've been in love with the ocean and fascinated by its creatures," McGuire said. "I started snorkeling and then did scuba in my teens. I wanted to know more about what I was seeing."

He loved tide pools and staring down in the kelp as he waited for waves. Works by John Steinbeck and marine biologist Ed Ricketts, inspired him as a teen to explore the sea where he lived. Before high school, he took a Dr. Floyd Siders' summer course in marine science. By then he knew his path was marine biology.

"What better way to live than to study, and later try to protect, the thing most important to me?"

McGuire saw his first shark while surfing as a kid, and has always been fascinated by them. However his path to focusing on sharks has been circuitous, officially beginning eight years ago.

"I worked in environmental health and toxic pollution prevention for several years," McGuire said. "Between 2001 and 2005, I joined a sailing expedition across the Pacific and dove healthy coral reefs with tons of sharks, and other islands that had been impacted by humans."

It was there he witnessed shark finning — sharks killed just for their fins — and saw the impact that the removal of sharks had on the remote islands. He looked into the phenomenon behind shark finning.

"It's a Gold Rush for fins to satisfy the huge new demand for an ancient dish, shark fin soup," McGuire said. "This culinary fad is destroying sharks by the tens of millions and marine ecosystems are suffering. Protecting sharks protects more than one species. It helps the entire marine ecosystem they live in. As apex predators, sharks are important for the health and the balance of the oceans. Protecting sharks helps protect fish and habitat important to the ocean and to the fish we love to eat."

McGuire has since had a number of extraordinary encounters with sharks, including one which took place during the filming of white sharks off Guadalupe Island, Mexico.



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"There were two large animals and two smaller sharks around 10 feet or so. I had a Mexican dive master who was my dive buddy and safety diver. He was using a broomstick as a fender. I was filming this 14 foot female Great White as she swam past about a meter away, panning her with my camera, thinking, 'this is the money shot!' I had a funny feeling and turning slowly, I saw another shark about a meter away wearing his Great White Grin. It was a 'gotcha' moment for the shark, but all he did was stare." McGuire said he exhausted his air and sank away. When he glanced at his buddy, his buddy was face to face with another large shark — staring. The two men went topside.

"The point is, when we are out diving, swimming and surfing, the sharks see us without us ever knowing," McGuire explained, "and they generally leave us alone. Recently, Congressman Jared Huffman (D-CA2) and Assemblyman Paul Fong (D-Cupertino) sponsored the landmark shark protection bill, AB 376, which bans the possession and sale of shark fins in California, or specifically, stops approximately 7 tons of fins from coming into California ports. It was signed into law by Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. on October 7, 2011. McGuire helped build that coalition that made the passage happen.

McGuire knows Congressman Huffman. They had worked together on a plastics bill, a clean water bill and the Forage Fish Bill.

The marine biologist said after five years of trying to get shark fins banned in San Francisco, he went to the Congressman and asked him to carry a state bill. "He loves to fish, so we invited him shark tagging and he caught two large female sevengill sharks which we tagged and released," McGuire said. "Having your representative captive on a boat is a great way to have their ear, and Jared listened." The men knew they needed an Asian American who understood the shark fin issues and who would communicate those issues to the Asian community. They sat down with Assemblyman Fong who, along with Huffman, is one of McGuire's heroes.

"Assemblyman Fong is an ocean champion," McGuire said. "He has braved criticism and even censure from his culture to do what he believes is right for the ocean. He recognizes the shark fin trade is not about culture but about sustainability. Shark fin soup is like elephant ivory, we don't need it to survive, but the oceans need sharks to survive."

"Sharks are iconic," McGuire continued, "they are symbols, symbols of power and beauty but also symbols of what is going wrong in our oceans. One third of shark species are listed as near threatened or threatened with extinction. But it's not just sharks that need our help, its critical wetland habitat, coral reefs, the great whales and countless other impacts humanity is having on what is really our life line. We need to rally around sharks and ocean health. Supporting community groups like the Pacifica Beach Coalition or nonprofits like Sea Stewards helps protect local habitat, reduce marine pollution and save big fish like sharks. Together we can take the pledge to protect the ocean we love. This Earth Day, in Pacifica, we can help sharks and the oceans by taking a bite out of plastic."

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