



ISLA SAN BENEDICTO

INTROUBLED WATERS

By Mike McGettigan

October 7, 1993

We anchored the Ambar III just before dawn and turned on the big tuna lights and waited. The dawn was just breaking when we saw the first huge shadow start circling the boat. Within the hour there were five more Giant Pacific Mantas swimming around the boat waiting for us to get in the water and play with them.

These twenty foot gentle giants hadn't seen a boat in approximately one year. The Mexican Government had closed access to San Benedicto Island in the Revillagigedo Island chain the previous January due to an erupting underwater volcano in the area.

We were as excited about seeing them as they were about seeing us. As soon as Sherry got in the water, a Manta we had named Bobtail (its tail was bitten off) came over and stopped right below her waiting for her to dive down and get on its back. It hovered at about six feet and waited like a giant space station. The minute it felt Sherry's touch, it slowly started swimming forward.

For several years we have played with our friends as they took us on rides out over the drop-off near our anchorage.

Giant yellowfin tuna to 300 pounds were swimming along the edge of the reef and schools of hammerhead sharks cruised by at about 100 feet.

When we use scuba gear these rides on the mantas often cover more than a mile and we stay down with them for more than an hour. There is no more beautiful way to see these crystal blue 85 degree waters than on the back of a giant manta.

We stayed there all day playing with our friends. That evening we headed for Socorro Island, the largest of the Islands, located 240 nautical miles south of Cabo San Lucas and another 30 miles south of the Island of San Benedicto. We were pleased to see that everything looked like we left it one year ago.

November and December 1993

We visited Isla San Benedicto three more times in the next two months and each time we noticed some ominous signs. There were fewer and fewer sharks in the water. The waters around these 100 million year old volcanic islands have always been "sharky" and you could usually plan on coming face to face with a monster tiger shark or two on every trip. None of the resident tiger sharks were there. The hammerheads were also few



Facing page: Sherry riding a manta that was later killed by Mexican fishing boats. Left: These hammerhead sharks are being thrown back after their fins are cut, which bring in \$40.00 per kilo.



Right: A Giant Manta's severed wing being loaded into a fishing boat to be used as shark bait.

and far between as were the silver tip reef sharks. The good news was that the giant mantas were still there.

We began trying to swim with these animals eight years ago and, after several weeks and many hours in the water, they started to come closer and let us touch them. As soon as we gained their trust, they became our friends forever. They would come to the sound of the boat and swim around while we dropped the anchor, just waiting to play. These same animals have been there year-round for the past seven or eight years. This is the only place we know of in the world where you can always have giant mantas to swim with, as well as all the other great pelagics: six varieties of sharks, including huge tigers, giant yellowfin tuna, wahoo, blue and striped marlin, humpback and, though infrequently, blue whales.

January 1994

There were more ominous signs. We had seen Mexican shark boats in the area on three occasions and, even though there is no commercial fishing within two miles of the Island, we were worried. These boats, like the ones in the photos, turned out to be an expeditionary group going to Clipperton Island. From their humble two-boat beginning in October 1993, there are now 12 boats killing about 1800 sharks per month at Clipperton Island. At this rate, remote Clipperton Island, 700 miles from the nearest land, will have no sharks left within a few months. Huge schools of hammerhead sharks are being caught in inshore monofilament gill nets, brought on board, their fins cut off, and the mortally wounded thrown back in the water.

February 4, 1994

We left the Island of San Benedicto and headed for Cabo San Lucas. On the last part of our 218 mile trip back, we saw friends Terry Kennedy and Joyce Clinton sailing out to Isla San Benedicto to spend some time with the Mantas and to keep an eye on what had been happening at the islands. Terry and I are founding members of "Sea Watch", a group that reports and documents any destruction observed in the Sea of Cortez and the surrounding waters.

The following is a tragic story reported by Terry and Joyce:

"At dawn, on the 14th of February, 1994 while anchored at the south end of San Benedicto Island, we were awakened by two Mexican fishing boats laying long lines and inshore gill nets on the reefs just 200 yards off the beach. At about 9:00 a.m., the UNICAP III, a Mexican government boat, started pulling

in their nets. As Joyce and I watched helplessly, our worst fears came true. Two of the mantas that we were riding the day before were hopelessly tangled in the nets. These gentle giants had fought all night and were torn to pieces by the nets. Because of the damage to the nets and to the mantas, the fishing boat, which was a Mexican Department of Pesca vessel, decided it would be easier to cut their net loose and throw it back in the water; entangled mantas, net and all. When the boats left, there was thousands of feet of thin monofilament all over the reef continuing to kill.

As the crews pulled in their long lines there were nothing but reef sharks on them. As these dead and dying sharks came up over the back of the boat, the lines were cut off above the hook and the sharks were dropped back in the water where they immediately sank to the bottom. The underwater reef was littered with dozens of dead sharks. In all this killing, not one fish was caught that was commercially usable.

In the meantime, the other fishing boat, MERO VII, was busy harpooning a third manta that came upon their boat. The 20 foot one-ton manta was gaffed with big hooks and lifted along side the boat, still very much alive. The crew launched a small boat and, with axes, proceeded to cut the wings off the live manta.

In one morning at this pristine volcanic island there were over five tons of fish killed. Many more were destined to die in the discarded nets. Incredibly, there was nothing more to show for this effort except two virtually useless manta wings.

I have talked with many famous divers including Howard Hall, Marty Snyderman and Stan Waterman and we all agree this was the only place in the world where you could come at any time of the year to ride these giant pacific mantas. These animals literally brought millions of dollars a year to the Mexican economy. All this was put in great jeopardy in four hours on Valentine's Day, 1994."

Fortunately, I was radioed immediately in Cabo San Lucas and was told what had occurred. Photographs and video were given to the San Diego based long range boat "American Angler" to rush to me in Cabo. We immediately contacted the Navy and they eventually arrested one of the boats and started searching for the other. The Navy claims the government fishing boat was taken to Manzanillo where it will be heavily fined, as will the other when it is found. I'm happy to report Televisa in Mexico City televised the whole incident in 13 Latin countries within five days.

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The whole diving world is watching Mexico to see if the authorities are really going to set an example with these boats, or whether they, as so often happens, will be allowed to fish with no more than a slap on the wrist. The severity of the action taken will indicate Mexico's resolve in preventing further senseless slaughter in their seas.

Without an immediate and enforceable ban on ALL commercial fishing within five miles of the islands, these remote islands will shortly go the way of the Sea of Cortez, which was, just a few short years ago, one of the richest seas in the world. Due to the introduction of tens of thousands of gill nets in the past 10 years, the fisheries in the Sea of Cortez have declined 60% to 90% during this period.

The word is out in California that the Sea of Cortez is dead. This is causing disastrous effects on tourism in fishing towns like Loreto and Bahia de Los Angeles. Experienced divers have long since left the Sea of Cortez for richer diving areas in other parts of the world.

Mexico is just beginning to understand how severe this problem has become but, like the United States, hasn't yet used its political might to take the hard and necessary steps to stop this tragedy from continuing.

It is our obligation to assist where we can to help protect these global treasures. Pelagic species move great distances, and as one country destroys it's seas, the seas of the world are destroyed. It's not just a Mexican problem, it's a global problem.

Communication is tantamount. To express your concerns, contact Hans Herrmann, Executive Director National Headquarters, Pronatura, Mexico City (5) 256-5558. Another source to contact is:

Gobernador del Estado de B.C.S.
Lic. Guillermo Mercado Romero
Dr. Gustavo Farias Noyola
Isabela Catolica Entre Allende Y Bravo
La Paz, B.C.S.
tel (112) 2-94-77 ext. 291 or fax (112) 5-41-90

For ecological or biological information about the Gulf, please contact Ms. Elena Chavarria, Executive Director Pronatura Sonora. Phone in Guaymas (622) 10186. Or call Oc. Francisco Aguilar, Executive Director Pronatura Peninsula de Baja California. Phone in Ensenada (667) 61912.

Mike McGettigan has been diving and fishing Mexican waters on a full time basis for the last 17 years. During that time he has traveled over 400,000 miles on the waters of the Sea of Cortez and has made over 100 trips to the Revillagigedo Islands. His 73 foot yacht, AMBAR III, is a well known platform for major documentaries made in the Sea of Cortez.

He is also the founder of Sea Watch, a group dedicated to stopping the destruction of the Sea of Cortez. For further information on how you can help, contact Sea Watch, 3939 N. Suttle Road, Unit 12, Portland, Oregon, 97217. Phone or fax Sea Watch in Mexico at 011-52-112-55108.



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