

Destruction of One of the Seven Underwater Wonders Imminent

Fishermen are Using Gillnets to Kill Hundreds (if Not Thousands) of Hammerhead Shark Pups in the Bay of La Paz »»»

{ By Johnny Friday }

Known to divers around the world as *El Bajo*, this infamous seamount located on the fringe of La Paz Bay is where Dr. Peter Klimley first discovered schooling hammerhead sharks in the 1970's. The first underwater images of this amazing phenomenon were filmed here by filmmakers Stan Waterman and Howard Hall in the early 1980's.



OVER THE NEXT TWO DECADES, El Bajo became the premier destination in the world for divers seeking to encounter schooling hammerhead sharks was recognized as a “top five” international dive site and became an underwater wonder of the world. Suddenly, in the mid- 1990's the shark schools became smaller - some thought the sharks had just stopped migrating here. One theory for the disappearance blamed the pressure of gillnetting in the Sea of Cortez and shark fishermen specifically targeting hammerhead sharks in the open Sea. My theory, although not yet based on detailed empirical studies, reveals the more likely culprit.

I've known about the juvenile shark fishery in the Bay of La Paz since 2002 when Mike McGettigan of Seawatch told me about it. I had yet to see it first hand until a few weeks ago. However, I have often seen the remnants of baby hammerhead fins and heads on El Mogote beach, but nothing in any disturbing quantities, nor had I seen any commercial panga fishermen on the beaches cleaning their shark catch. Having spent over six years filming just about every illegal fishing practice from gillnetting and long-lining to

commercial spear-fishermen using “hookah”, I have seen my fair share of devastation. However, nothing could have prepared me for this absolutely wasteful and senseless destruction of newborn hammerhead and whitenose sharks.

The Bay of La Paz and El Mogote (the sand peninsula in front of the city of La Paz) are a perfect sanctuary for these newborn sharks. It is a nursery, a safe haven devoid of predators and high in food concentrations that fuel the newborn sharks as they struggle to reach maturity. Due to the biological and geographical characteristics of the Bay, the region is ideal for several shark species, including the whale shark which utilizes these waters to drop their young and allow them to thrive within the nutrient rich waters. Little is known of the nursing grounds in La Paz, but empirical data suggests that this is an important pupping area for these two species of sharks as well as the whale shark.

Fish for the markets in Baja are becoming increasingly more difficult to catch and commercial fishermen must travel further, longer and use more fuel. For many, there is no economic benefit to fishing these distant fishing grounds.

Hence, a number of commercial fishermen in La Paz have taken to setting gillnets within the outer bay (the shark nursery) during the winter months when the newborn sharks are present, knowing they will fill their nets with these small sharks which have very little commercial value. According to one shark fisherman, there are approximately twenty pangas that specifically set gillnets and target these sharks.

Typically, the shark fishermen set their gillnets and come back within 3-4 days to pull them up. Then they take their pangas and catch to the outer beaches of El Mogote where they are less likely to be seen and clean their catch. Frequently on windy days, they must return to the inner Bay of La Paz and clean their catch on the inside beaches of El Mogote. They try to avoid this as much as possible for fear of photos and confrontations with passersby. Although many of them have permits to fish using gillnets, many (if not all) do not have permits to fish sharks. On an average day, each panga can haul in upwards of a hundred or more sharks. On this particular day, with only one panga and one gillnet, one fisherman was able to kill over one hundred and thirty juvenile sharks of which over ninety percent were hammerhead sharks.

Although El Mogote and the Bay of La Paz receive protection from bottom dragging vessels, it does not receive the same protection from panga-based gillnetters and long-liners. One can only imagine the economic benefits of protecting El Mogote and the Bay of La Paz from gill-netting. Today, La Paz does not even rate in the top twenty dive locations. Divers and dive clubs now travel to other locations such as Costa Rica and the Galapagos islands where sharks receive protection and divers spend their dollars.

Is there a chance for hammerhead sharks to recover in La Paz? Absolutely, it is not too

late, but the clock is ticking fast. If panga gillnetters are left to continue their plunder of baby sharks in the Bay of La Paz, then these animals do not stand a chance nor will divers and eco-tourists continue to travel to La Paz to see them and infuse needed tourism dollars into the local economy. It is a colossal economic and ethical mistake to allow a small group of fishermen to continue to decimate present and future generations of hammerhead sharks.

Mexico has proven itself a world leader in recognizing its valuable environmental resources, moving swiftly to protect and restore them. It is in Mexico's best interest to protect these nursing grounds and support the protection of the very animals that made La Paz famous amongst the worlds' diving communities. There are only a few known places in the world that can lay claim to having a hammerhead shark nursery in their back yard. La Paz is one of them. With simple fisheries management and enforcement, the protection and preservation of this once magical location and tourist attraction stands a chance of regaining its economic value while also protecting the future of this magnificent and unique shark we know as the Hammerhead.

Now Mexico must move boldly to protect one of the world's most remarkable sharks. The future of these “world famous” hammerhead sharks of El Bajo is dependent on the rare and fragile shark nursery in the Bay of La Paz. ■

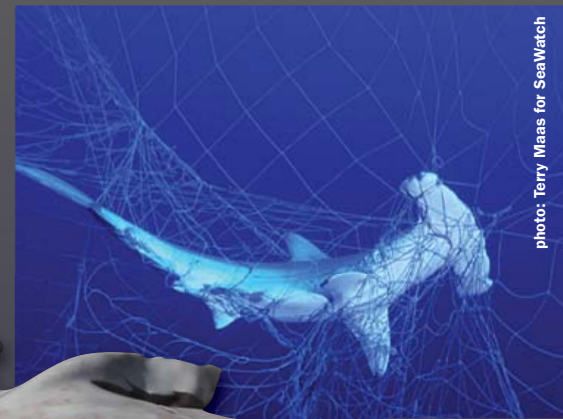
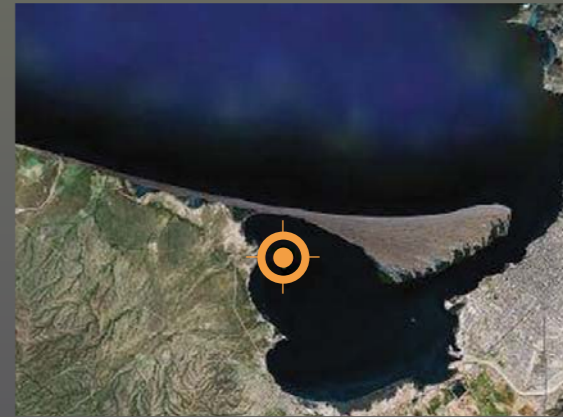


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