

Great White Terror

Author Peter Benchley wrote *Jaws*, a best-selling novel about a monstrous great white shark. But what happened when he faced one of these creatures for real?

By Peter Benchley

Blinded by blood, **nauseated** by the smell of fish guts, whale oil, and rotten horseflesh, I gripped the aluminum bars of the shark cage. I tried to steady myself against the violent jolts as the cage was tossed by the choppy sea. The water was cold, and I shivered.

I thought of why I was bobbing alone in a flimsy cage in the frigid Dangerous Reef, off the coast of southern Australia. I had written a novel about a great white shark. The book, *Jaws*, had become a popular success. A television producer had challenged me to go diving with the monster of my imagination. A film crew would capture my experience. My wife could come along in the boat. How could I say no?

Now, though, I wondered how I could have said yes. I had expected to find silence underwater. But my breath roared like wind in a tunnel as I inhaled through my regulator. My exhales gurgled noisily, like bubbles being blown through a straw in a drink. A rope connected me to a boat that floated above me, on the surface.

Then I saw movement. Something was moving against the blue. Something dark. It was there and gone and there again. It was coming straight at me, **deliberately**, unhurried, emerging from the mist.



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Great whites are the largest flesh-eating fish in the sea. They can be as much as 18 feet long and 4,000 pounds!

I heard my pulse hammering in my ears. I wasn't afraid, exactly. I was in a state of excitement and something like shocked disbelief.

The animal kept coming, and now I could see all of it: the pointed snout, the steel gray upper body in stark contrast with the ghostly white belly, the awful knife blade of the dorsal fin.

The tail fin swung powerfully back and forth. It came slowly, steadily, as if it had no need to speed, for it knew it could not be stopped.



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Sharks are notoriously difficult to study in the wild, and much about them remains a mystery to scientists. Here, a diver, protected by a metal cage, gets a close look at one of nature's most fearsome creatures. As author Peter Benchley learned, such dives are fraught with danger.

It did not slow. Its black eyes showed no interest or excitement. As it drew within a few feet of me, it opened its mouth. I saw first the lower jaw, crowded with jagged, needle-pointed teeth. Then, as the upper jaw detached from the skull and dropped, I saw the huge, triangular cutting teeth. Each was **serrated** like a saw blade.

Rows of Teeth

The great white's mouth opened wider and wider, until it seemed it would swallow the entire cage and me within it. I stared into the huge pink and white cavern that narrowed into a black hole, the **gullet**. I could see rows and rows of spare teeth buried in the gum tissue. Each tooth was a holstered weapon waiting to replace a tooth lost in battle.

A millisecond before the mouth would have banged into the cage, the great white bit down

and was rammed forward by a sudden thrust of its powerful tail. The upper teeth struck four inches from my face. They scraped noisily against the aluminum bars. Then the lower teeth gnashed quickly, looking for something solid to sink into.

I shrank back, stumbling. My brain shouted, "You . . . you of all people ought to know: Human beings do not belong in the water with great white sharks!"

The shark withdrew, then quickly bit the cage again, and again. It wasn't until the third or fourth bite that I realized the shark wasn't really attacking. It was more like an exploration, a testing. A tasting.

Then the shark turned, showing its flank. I crept forward and reached between the bars to feel its skin. It felt hard and solid, a torpedo of muscle, sleek and polished like steel. I let



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Left: Species like the great white and the tiger shark have sharp teeth with serrated edges. Lost teeth are replaced quickly with spare teeth that sit under the current tooth.

Right: The 1975 blockbuster movie *Jaws* was based on a novel by author Peter Benchley. The book is about a massive great white shark that terrorizes a beach resort. The story was later turned into a blockbuster movie. Benchley died in 2006.

my fingers trail along with the movement of the animal. But when I rubbed the other way, against the grain, I felt the legendary sandpaper texture. The skin is made up of millions of tiny toothlike particles.

The shark was moving away, upward. It had found a hunk of horsemeat, probably 10 pounds, possibly 20, dangling in the chum [bait]. The shark's mouth opened and swallowed the chunk of horse whole. Excited now, the shark turned away in search of something more to eat. I saw a length of rope drift into its gaping mouth. With a start, I realized it was my lifeline, the only connection between the cage and the boat.

Don't get caught! Not in the mouth! Please!

Frenzied Thrashing

The great white's mouth closed and opened, closed and opened. The shark shook its head, trying to get rid of the rope. But the rope was stuck. In a fraction of a second, I saw that the rope had snagged between two of the shark's teeth. At that instant, the creature's small, **primitive** brain must have sent a message of alarm, for suddenly the shark seemed to panic. Instinct took over. The animal's tremendous strength and great weight—at least a ton spread over its 14-foot body—exploded in **frenzied** thrashing.

The shark's tail whipped one way, its head the other. Its body slammed against the cage and the boat. All I could see was a burst of bubbles amid a cloud of blood and shreds of flesh from the butchered horse.

I knew what would happen next: the shark's teeth would sever the rope. My survival would depend on precisely where the rope was cut. If

the shark found itself free of the cage, it would flee, leaving the cage to drift away and, perhaps, sink. Someone from the boat would get a line to me. Eventually. But if the rope stayed caught in the shark's mouth, the animal might drag the cage to the bottom, 50 feet down, and beat it to pieces. If I were going to survive, I would have to find the rope, grab it, and cut it, all while being tumbled about like dice in a cup. I reached for the knife in the rubber sheath strapped to my leg.



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"The Most Beautiful Creatures on Earth"

Peter Benchley's book and movie, *Jaws*, shaped people's notions of sharks as giant terrifying killers. But Benchley himself regretted that his work caused people to fear and hate sharks. He was fascinated by how adaptable they are and their importance to the ocean ecosystem. Benchley once called them "the most beautiful creatures on Earth." In his later years, he worked to protect sharks from hunting. Every year, humans kill nearly 100 million sharks, mainly for their fins, which are a prized ingredient in shark fin soup. Many shark species, including the great white, are endangered.

This isn't happening! It can't be! I'm just a writer! I write fiction! What I didn't know was that just above me, in the boat, my wife, Wendy, was watching all of this. She saw the rope slip into the shark's mouth. She saw the shark growing desperate to rid itself of the cage, thrashing and gnawing. She also saw that nobody else on the boat had noticed any of it. Wendy knew what would happen if the shark couldn't shake loose of the rope. And it soon became obvious that it couldn't.

She quickly took hold of the rope. She leaned over, trying to see the head of the shark and locate the spot where the rope entered its mouth.

Ghastly Eyeballs

Just then the shark raised its head and lunged upward, and Wendy found herself nose to nose with—perhaps 24 inches away from—the most **notorious** and frightening face in nature. The snout was smeared with red. Bits of flesh clung to its jaws, and blood drooled from both sides of its mouth. The upper jaw was down, in the

bite position, and gnashing as if trying to climb the rope. The eyes, as big as baseballs, were rolled backward in their sockets. As the great body shook, it forced air through its gill slits, making a noise like a grunting pig.

Wendy shook the rope and yelled at the shark. She demanded that it let go of the rope. The shark grunted at her and twisted its head, showing her one of its ghastly black eyeballs, and the rope sprang free.

The great white slid backward off the stern and away from the boat. When it was fully in the water, it rolled onto its side and, like a fighter plane peeling away from a formation, glided down and away into the darkness, free.

And so was I.

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