

Diver loses life during Bahamas shark-feed



Above: Bull shark in the Bahamas – was a fatal accident waiting to happen?

THE PROFESSIONAL SHARK-FEED diving industry has suffered what is thought to be its first fatality.

Markus Groh, 49, from Austria, died after being bitten during a baited shark dive in the Bahamas.

The lawyer from Vienna, described as an avid diver, was on a six-day trip with other Austrians aboard the dive-boat *Shear Water*, run out of Riviera Beach, Florida by Abernethy's Scuba Adventures, which specialises in shark-diving excursions. It had been marketed as a trip seeking out tiger and hammerhead sharks.

The fatal dive occurred off Great Isaac Cay, the divers making an open-water dive to encounter sharks drawn in by fish bait. According to some reports, it was a bull shark that attacked Groh, biting him on a leg, perhaps because of a piece of bait getting very close to his body.

It was also reported that the fatal injury may have been a pulmonary embolism caused by a rapid ascent, rather than the bite itself.

A Mayday call was put out and Groh, in a critical condition, was

shark-feed

evacuated by helicopter to Miami's Jackson Memorial Hospital, where he died shortly afterwards.

As **DIVER** went to press, it had yet to emerge whether the group was diving at a site providing some natural cover on the seabed, or was relatively exposed.

According to the Bahamas Diving Association, operator Jim Abernethy had "pushed the envelope" in running cageless bait dives with the more aggressive and large shark species such as bulls and tigers.

"I've personally pleaded with Jimmy to stop this action, but he refused to comply with good judgment," Neal Watson, President of the Bahamas Diving Association, told *The Miami Herald*. "He would not use a cage, and this is the result."

Cageless shark feeds involving bull and tiger sharks do, however, take place in other parts of the world.

Baited shark dives were banned altogether in Florida in 2001, concerns ranging from diving risks to perceived effects on shark behaviour which, it is thought, could increase risk to other

water-users off popular beaches.

But shark-feed dives remain legal in the nearby Bahamas. They are carried out mainly with such species as nurse, blacktip and Caribbean reef sharks.

As **DIVER** went to press, Abernethy had not responded to a request for information. But he told US media: "I would never have done any of this if I thought there would have been an accident." ■

* *Fatal shark attacks worldwide fell to their lowest level for 20 years in 2007, according to the International Shark Attack File. Only one death was recorded, the lowest figure since 1987, when there were no fatalities.*

But the number of shark attacks rose slightly over the previous year, with 71 in 2007 compared with 63 in 2006.

Of the 71, 50 occurred off US states, with 32 of these in Florida waters – a notable jump from 23 in 2006.

Twelve attacks were recorded in Australia, the remaining nine split among South Africa, New Caledonia, Fiji, Ecuador, Mexico and New Zealand.

Embarrassed Emperor pledges good works

A MAJOR RED SEA DIVE CHARTER operator has pledged to set a strong example over conservation issues after being named and shamed by the respected regional conservation body it helped found.

Emperor Divers was named as February's "Violator of the Month" by the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA). The "award" was created as part of the Red Sea Wrecks Campaign, launched by HEPCA at the Dive 2007 Show at the NEC last October.

One of the first conservation projects carried out under the Red Sea Wrecks Campaign has been the installation of a mooring system around the popular *Thistlegorm* wreck, to reduce wear and tear on the wreck's structures.

Emperor's transgressions, based on submitted reports, included disregard for the mooring system and other regulations governing visits to the wreck, as well as "anchoring and littering within National Park boundaries".

HEPCA declared the choice of

Emperor Divers for the dubious award as "not an easy one", considering that Emperor had been "one of the biggest supporters of HEPCA, not to mention one of HEPCA's founding members, and recognised worldwide as setting the standards of best practice in matters of environmental concerns".

Moving fast to defend its reputation and restore commitment to conservation measures by its fleet's crews, Emperor met Amr Ali, Managing Director of HEPCA, within days of its Violator branding. HEPCA, duly convinced that the company meant to right any wrongs, stated: "HEPCA would like to thank Emperor Fleet for its swift, serious and professional actions on receiving notice of its nomination as Violator of the Month. HEPCA is pleased to be working closely with Emperor to ensure that the alleged violations are not repeated and that all staff are reminded of the importance of awareness of environmental issues and regulations."

HEPCA was granted a consultative meeting with the captains of

Emperor vessels, and subsequently thanked "staff, captains and crew of the Emperor Fleet for their many beneficial suggestions offered".

It said all the captains had agreed

to join the HEPCA Volunteer Red Sea Ranger Initiative, under which dive industry operators nominate one or more individuals to note and report environmental violations. ■

So what went adrift with the *Thistlegorm* project?

HEPCA HAS EXPLAINED WHY a system of surface-buoyed diver descent and ascent lines has not been installed over the *Thistlegorm* wreck, as originally planned, to supplement the boat moorings laid around the ship.

"About 80% of the boats going to the wreck are day-boats out from Sharm El Sheikh," Amr Ali, Managing Director of HEPCA, told **DIVER**. "The problem is that, for security reasons, they are not allowed to carry Zodiacs or other tenders, and these would be required for ferrying divers between charter boats and the diving lines."

"There was also an issue raised by

technical divers, who pointed out that they would not be able to suspend their decompression rigs off these lines, which would be very busy with other divers."

Access to the wreck is, therefore, via descent down the mooring line to which the divers' vessel is attached, followed by a seabed swim of some 5m across to the wreck.

But even the mooring lines have hit problems. They rise just 9m off the seabed, held aloft by small buoys. Dive boats send down divers to attach the boat lines to them.

But within months of the mooring system's introduction, half of the 32



Emperor Fleet skippers have pledged to join HEPCA's volunteer ranger scheme.

mooring lines that surround the wreck have been severed – by nothing more mischievous than the movements of the ocean.

"Although the mooring blocks are 5m off the wreck, the lines have still been dragged across the ship's structure in stronger currents, causing them to rub and be severed," said Amr Ali.

So why not use metal hawsers rather than rope? "The large buoys required to hold them up would be valuable and they would be taken by fishermen in no time at all!" said the HEPCA managing director.

He admitted that as many as 70%

of visiting skippers were still tying directly into the wreck, in contravention of regulations governing the newly installed mooring system.

This poor record was attributable not so much to the teething problems experienced with the system but to an endemic "resistance to change".

As **DIVER** went to press, HEPCA was addressing the practical problem of mooring severance, and meeting Sharm skippers in a bid to establish broad commitment to the system. ■

THE BIG QUESTION

Reverse logic

ALMOST TWO-THIRDS of you replied "yes" to our latest question: "Are you happy to do reverse profiles?" Surprising? Perhaps, given that this approach to diving is not sanctioned by any of the training agencies.

The answer suggests that divers are thinking outside the training envelope – perhaps just recognising the practicalities of everyday diving.

In one or two cases, however, we did wonder whether respondents had understood the question.

Just for the record, a reverse profile comes about when you make a repetitive dive that's deeper than a previous dive, or do the deeper part of a single multi-level dive after a shallower part.

What's clear is that divers these days are led by their computers. If they are happy to do reverse profiles regularly, perhaps this should be factored into training. More research would be helpful.

Each month we ask you to comment on a topical issue at Divernet.com, and we draw one name at random to win a Luxfer 3-litre compact emergency pony cylinder worth £109, courtesy of Sea & Sea. Congratulation to this month's winner, Janet Hallyburton.

HERE ARE SOME OF YOUR COMMENTS:

"Even the '53 Everest expedition practised in North Wales before going for the 'big one', not the other way around." *P R Hickman*

"No – but not for any good reason, other than having had it drummed into me that it's a bad thing!" *Gavin Denton*

"Sometimes nature dictates when you can dive, but in general I always try to do the deepest first." *Darren Evers*

"Reverse profile dives have not been found to greatly increase the risk of DCI. Dive computers closely track nitrogen loading far more accurately than tables ever could. So while I would consider reverse profiles, I still plan 'forward' profiles, as it maximises my no-deco time." *Jon Chan*

"Modern computers take most things into account, and provided you don't push the limits, I haven't had any problems yet." *Tony Marsh*

"Yes, but knowing that I will have restricted my second dive options in terms of time and decompression requirements – plan the dive and dive the plan!" *Jay Benson*

"Touch your nose three times, stand on one leg for 10 seconds, rub the rabbit's foot four times and cross your fingers. It's all nonsense. Reverse profiles are fine and, by the way, the Earth is not flat." *Dermot Grace*

"Done quite a few, no problems so far. Stick with what you know – experience counts, not certificates." *Bill Thompson*

"Performed sensibly, well within the bounds of normal dive limits and with a decent safety stop, a reverse profile would not prevent me enjoying a dive." *Maxwell Hill*

"No, I would never consider it. My dive buddy (the Mrs) always crashes in reverse." *Chris Spinks*

"Everything I have read on the subject suggests that 'deepest dive first' is a myth with its origins lost in the mists of time, and no medical or factual evidence to support it." *Barry Faiers*

"If you're doing one dive to 30m, you take on a similar nitrogen loading as you would if you did a dive to 10m then one to 30m, because the deepest depth determines your final nitrogen loading. Doing the shallower dive second provides an opportunity for off-gassing, but a reverse profile is no more dangerous than a single dive." *William Hunter*

"As long as the computer doesn't scream at me, I'm OK with it." *Rob Walker*

"Until training agencies give me the green light I will continue to do my deepest dive first." *John Lewis*

THIS MONTH'S BIG QUESTION IS:

Are you happy with your dive/travel insurance?

Vote yes or no, and feel free to comment

You too could win a pony! For more information about Luxfer cylinders, visit Sea & Sea's website www.dive-team.com

