



# Befriending Giants

When Filipino fishermen befriended an unlikely ally, it created the world's newest — and most unusual — shark-watching hot spot

► STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHAWN HEINRICH

Local fishermen in Oslob, Philippines, have formed a unique and extraordinary relationship with a group of whale sharks that feed in the waters of their village. Each night, the whale sharks pass back and forth in the shallows, gorging themselves on the abundant tiny shrimp that rise from the deep toward the surface, where the fishermen also catch the shrimp using fine-mesh hand nets. Given the competition for

this resource, the two were bound to clash. Instead, the fishermen chose to share some of their catch with the whale sharks, believing this would bring good luck and increased future catches.

The community saw an opportunity to develop a small whale-shark tourism business and began charging a small fee of 100 pesos (US\$2.30) for customers to dive or snorkel with the sharks. For this low-income community, these



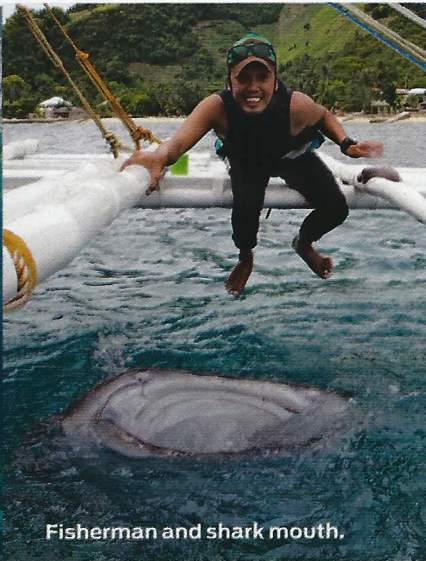
modest fees offer an important addition to their earnings. The fishermen feed the whale sharks handfuls of shrimp, while snorkelers and divers are treated to an unbelievable encounter. And what a spectacle it is: Whale sharks up to 25 feet long line up vertically beneath

the tiny canoes, their huge mouths breaking the surface as they gulp down small handfuls of shrimp.

The feeding of the whale sharks raises legitimate concerns about possible negative impacts on the well-being of these animals. In this case, however, the whale



A whale shark of Oslob.



Fisherman and shark mouth.

## 4 WAYS TO HELP SAVE THE SHARKS

**1** Go to **shark savers.org**, **projectaware.org**, **wildaid.org**, **pew environment.org/sharks** and **coral.org** to learn more about international efforts to protect sharks.

**2** Donate to organizations such as Shark Savers that work with the dive industry to foster

responsible dive eco-tourism with sharks.

**3** Contribute to Shark Savers' SharksCount program. The data you collect during your dives will be entered into a comprehensive database that is accessed by scientists.

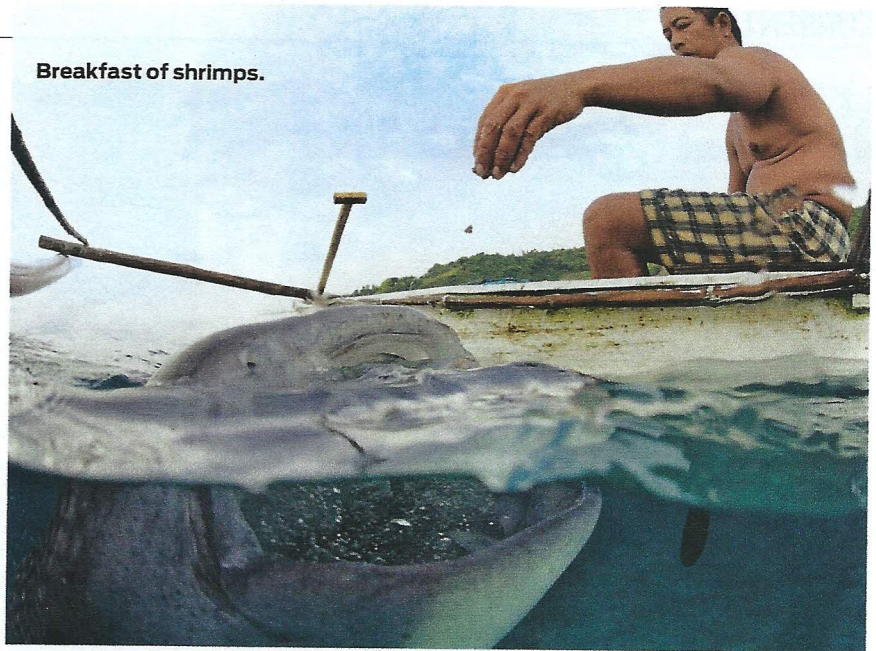
**4** Earn Project AWARE's Shark Conservation Diver Distinctive Specialty C-card (**projectaware.org**).

sharks here are feeding on naturally occurring shrimp in these waters, with the morning hand-feeding offering only a small additional supplement.

The greatest threat to the sharks, however, is illegal poaching. The fishermen recounted a time in the late '90s when fishermen from the neighboring island of Bohol came over and harpooned and finned every last whale shark. Now a decade later, some whale sharks have finally returned to the waters of this village. Tourism, with all its imperfections, might provide the greatest incentive for this local community to protect these vulnerable animals from a repeat of what happened a decade ago.

The bond between these fishermen and the whale sharks, juxtaposed with the senseless slaughter by fishermen from the neighboring village, drives home this point: The human connection with nature is vital, and when local communities have a real stake in preserving it, we might just have the key to sustainable conservation outcomes.

Breakfast of shrimps.



**> Go Now** Atmosphere Resorts (**atmosphereresorts.com**) is an eco-conscious operator in Dauin that offers half-day, snorkel-only encounters with strict guidelines — no touching and no flash photography — that cost approximately \$55, and include boat ride, food and beverages. To get to Dauin, fly into Dumaguete, Philippines, which is 30 minutes from the resort. The best water and weather conditions are from December through June.