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Wednesday, 11th August 2010

For the last six years, when diving I have worn a Shark POD attached to my bail-out bottle, upgrading earlier this year to the new and more powerful unit, the Shark Shield. In early August, I was hookah-diving in 50m water off Kalbarri, Western Australia, researching a group of cowry shells which are the subject of a book I am co-authoring. After completing a bottom time which had incurred for me a reasonable decompression penalty, I was making a slow ascent when I realized that I was no longer alone. Ten metres away, swimming vertically at the same rate as myself, was a Great White Shark. It was a scenario I had rehearsed in my mind a thousand times during the 27 years I have been diving, but this was the first shark of this species that I had encountered underwater.

My first reaction was to check that the Shark Shield was working by crossing one leg over the other, the braided steel "tail" immediately causing my opposite leg to twitch uncomfortably as it brushed over it. By this time I was 10m below the surface, and signalled my deckhand to lower the decompression shot-line. The shark had continued on a parallel course and in fact briefly broke the surface with its dorsal fin before making an unhurried turn downwards in my direction. Head-on, the shark was a very intimidating sight and prior to this moment I never really felt "threatened" by its presence. It halted 5-6m away from me. I had the distinct impression that the shark sensed something was "not right" about the wetsuit-clad creature which was the focus of its interest. Several times, it swam out almost to the limit of visibility (15m) before returning and stopping again at the same distanced from me.

The minutes were ticking by as I kept one eye on the shark and the other on my decompression meter. Had the shark begun to behave aggressively, I would probably have boarded the boat immediately, but the Shark Shield appeared to keep it from approaching too close. To say that I felt "safe" would be an overstatement-one feels very vulnerable dangling solo off a line in 50m water in the presence of a 4m Great White Shark-but the Shark Shield gave me the confidence to complete my decompression and avoid a possible incidence of the "bends". The last I saw of the shark was its tail disappearing into the distance; this was a moment I chose to quickly climb into the boat, turning the Shark Shield off once I was on the dive ladder and out of harm"s reach.

My lifestyle involves diving many remote and deep water locations off the west and south coasts of Australia. The Shark Shield offers me an element of safety and peace of mind without which I would be unable to pursue my chosen profession with the same enthusiasm.

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