

A SHARK'S TALE:

People



Pensacola Scientist Works to Change the Image of Sharks



By Harriet Riley

As the summer months begin in Pensacola, just the mention of the word “shark” is enough to keep everyone out of the emerald green waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The “S” word evokes images of long pointy teeth and bloody limbs. But world-renowned shark scientist Erich Ritter, PhD, says shark attacks are rare and that sharks are, in fact, “misunderstood creatures that you can have fun with.”

This 47-year-old recent Pensacola implant has written the book on sharks. Actually, he has written five books on sharks, but his first in English was just published in January of this year. *Understanding Sharks: The Fascinating Behavior of a Threatened Hunter* is just one of many projects relating to sharks by the Swiss-born shark behaviorist. With his bright smile and lean good looks, Ritter can be engaging—even convincing—in communicating his love for sharks.

This modern day Dr. Dolittle teaches people that everyone can talk to sharks. With more than 6,000 underwater encounters with sharks of all types, Ritter has a mission to bridge the gap between sharks and humans, backing up all his information with personal, up-close observation of sharks in the wild. “You can’t study sharks in a pickle jar.”

His wife, Pensacola native Robin Haven, says Ritter is not a sit-behind-a-desk sort of scientist. “He believes in going out in the water with the sharks. He understands their behavior,” says Haven. Ritter himself says, “You have to observe to be sure. You don’t have to hug a shark, but you have to appreciate them.”

His appreciation of sharks dates back to his earliest years in his native Switzerland. This landlocked country seems an unlikely place to nurture the future Dr. Shark, but Ritter still remembers the first time he saw sharks on television at age 7. He says the narrator was negative in his feelings about sharks and painted a picture of the creatures as dangerous animals of the sea. Ritter recalls feeling like the beautiful sharks he saw on the screen did not look like the ferocious creatures described by the narrator of the program. He was hooked.

“I told my mother at age 12 that I wanted to be a shark doctor because I was so intrigued by the animals and my mixed emotions about them,” says Ritter. Remember, this young Swiss boy had never seen a shark in person. He did, however, see the movie *Jaws* in 1975, just before he entered college with a major in zoology. He vowed at that time to be the first person to free dive with white sharks. He was among the first and was *the* first to use the up-close encounter to interpret shark’s approach behavior.

With his undergraduate degree under his belt, Ritter went on to earn both a master’s degree in zoology and a doctorate in behavioral ecology from the University of Zurich. Yet, he still had not had an “up close and personal” encounter with a shark. While working on his PhD and lecturing at the University, Ritter traveled to the Maldives at the age of 27 to see his first sharks. After doing so, Ritter knew he had to spend a lot more time with the fascinating creatures. He moved to Miami for post-doctorate work at the

University of Miami and to observe sharks in their natural setting. “If we don’t go in the water, we never learn,” says Ritter.

In the early 1990s, Ritter became widely known for telling the experts that they were wrong about sharks. “I began telling scientists that sharks are not dangerous creatures. Only the situations humans find themselves in with sharks are dangerous,” says Ritter. As he began to study shark-human interaction, Ritter was able to debunk many old ideas about sharks. He has challenged myths such as slapping the water deters sharks or human bloods attracts sharks. “Human blood is not a factor in attracting sharks and slapping the water does attract sharks,” says Ritter.

He also helped spark a conservation movement for sharks, the most abundant predator on earth. “The slaughtering of sharks is one of the biggest ecological time bombs,” Ritter says. “We kill more than 200 million sharks a year.” He says that this abundant predator helps control the ecosystem of the ocean environment. “Without sharks, the ocean will die.” Ritter is an advocate of protecting the abundant, rather than the rare, species of this earth.

His fierce support of sharks and outspoken criticism of scientists who rarely leave their desks led him to leave the academic world behind in 1999. “I was done with narrow-minded thinkers,” Ritter says. He now works with the Shark Research Institute, funded primarily by grants. There, he introduces doctoral students to

his studies. "Everything I do is for the animal," he says. His main goal as a field biologist is to demystify the shark's image by changing people's attitudes about these sea creatures. His research projects have the caveat that no animals can be harmed for the research. No sharks are tagged or damaged in any way in his projects. He challenges his students to think hard and be creative in data collection. He has come up with guidelines on human interaction with sharks based on actual underwater experiments.

Another component of his research is the Global Shark Attack File of Princeton, New Jersey, a non-profit organization which studies shark accidents. Ritter is often the first scientist called after a shark incident. He analyzes the bite and determines the type and size of the shark. He was consulted after Jesse Arbogast lost an arm from a shark attack at Pensacola Beach in 2001, and again, more recently, in the tragic death of Jamie Daigle, age 14, at Miramar Beach near Destin last summer. After working with yet another shark victim last summer, he helped start a shark victims' network called SAVN, or Shark Accident Victim Network

(sharkvictimnetwork.org) "Every victim shares something unique with other shark victims: a close encounter with the most misunderstood creature on this planet," says Ritter.

Ritter himself was the victim of a highly publicized shark attack on the Discovery Channel's Shark Week series in 2002. Not his first shark bite, Ritter lost a large portion of his calf and a dangerous amount of blood in this encounter with a bull shark in Walker's Cay, Bahamas. The TV footage became the widely-shown documentary "Anatomy of a Shark Bite," and Ritter became the focus of a heated exchange in the national media and on the Internet over the cause of the incident. Ritter says he always dives with a spotter on shore looking down into the water. The spotter in this situation did not notice the bull shark and the shark bit Ritter's leg once and then got stressed and nearly took his leg on the second bite. Ritter calls the event "a blessing in disguise." As the victim of a serious shark bite, more people are listening to him, and he is spreading his message to a wider audience, Ritter says.

He returned to Walker's Cay four months after the accident and many times since then to swim with the sharks. He has spent even more time swimming with sharks through his Shark School (sharkschool.com) classes offered in several locations throughout the world. Ecotourists, photographers or just the curious can choose between Walker's Cay, Gansbaai or Durban, South Africa, the Red Sea, Egypt, the Maldives, or Tahiti. With your choice of interaction, observation or photography in four languages, these intensive one-week

classes offer a unique view of sharks with their main champion.

With his shark school and research keeping Ritter on the road a great deal of the time, he's always happy to return to Pensacola. Since his marriage to Robin Haven in 2002 and the purchase of a home in Pensacola two years ago, Ritter says Pensacola is his first true home since Switzerland. He calls himself a "foreign redneck" because of his love for trucks, country music and NASCAR. He says he loves the friendly Southern hospitality, food and culture of Northwest Florida.

When Ritter is in Pensacola, it's hard to find him behind his desk. He's eager to share his love of sharks with everyone from scuba groups to local elementary schools to Pensacola Beach lifeguards. But he's never here for long enough, according to wife Robin. This man who calls himself "a true believer in Dr. Doolittle" has to get back into the water with his misunderstood creatures. As both a victim and an advocate, Ritter challenges everyone to think about their impression of the shark and give some respect to this mighty creature of the sea. **PM**

Advice from Dr. Erich Ritter on Avoiding a Shark Accident.

From <http://www.savn.org>

Stay away from

- piers (no matter if there is fishing or not)
- jetties, channels, harbor entrances, waterways
- harbors
- sandbars, anchored boats
- any forms of waste release
- any structure in the water (primarily if there is nothing else around)
- any larger non-manned floating objects
- Drop offs
- Cliffs

Do not swim

- in murky water
- where you can't see the bottom
- at/in/around river mouths
- close to fish / marine life cleaning areas
- close to diving birds
- close to dolphins
- close to seals
- close to fishermen (any kind)
- during stormy times
- close to breaker zones

What if a shark shows up?

- stay calm, stop moving
- do not swim away, get vertical
- turn with the swim motion of the shark by sculling with your hands (close to body)
- do not splash
- do not hit a shark
- if you feel you have to act: push the shark away
- if you feel you have to use force: aim for the gills, not the snout



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