

## STAN WATERMAN: UNDERWATER GENIUS

Dawn had just broken and overhead the sky was grey and close. The morning air was salty and the choppy ocean, just 50 miles off the coast of San Diego, seemed to stretch out forever. Unprotected by either islands or shore, unanchored in the bottomless sea, the 70 ton Bottom Scratcher, a fishing boat outfitted with an aluminum shark cage, drifted lazily across the surface of the water. In its wake it left an oily trail of frozen mackerel, chum for any blue sharks in the area.

The leader of the expedition, 67 year old Stan Waterman, a legend among divers and the grey-haired father of American underwater cinematography, checked with the members of his team. Two of them, his daughter Suzy and his friend, author Peter Benchley, would man the cage: Suzy with a bag of bloody fish parts to draw the sharks in, and Benchley with a bang stick—a short pole fitted with a shotgun shell—to keep them from getting too close. Two other divers, Howard Hall and Bob Cranston, dressed in chain mail body armor over their wet suits. They would position themselves as targets outside of the cage. Waterman, with neither the protection of the cage or the chain mail, would film the blues feeding.

When the team was set the cage was lowered over the side of the boat to a depth of 20 feet. Hall and Cranston, their stainless steel suits making them look more like medieval knights than divers, escorted Suzy and Benchley to their positions inside it. Waterman, with his camera, was the last to slip off the boat's dive platform and disappear into the slate grey sea.

The water was cold and silent. Surface light provided good ocean visibility but there was nothing to see, no motion except for the divers and the rocking of the shark cage in the ocean swell. At her father's signal, Suzy opened her bait bag and pushed a handful of the dead fish through the bars of the cage. Within minutes the blue sharks had picked up the scent and the first loomed out of the darkness at the edge of visibility. A few moments later a second appeared, and then another. Though they'd come from long distances and had been moving at speeds of up to 20mph, when they arrived they moved slowly, as if they'd been there all along, just out of sight. Waterman turned on his camera and buried his head behind it. Cranston rode shotgun at his back.

The first blues on the scene were small, perhaps four or five feet long. They moved to the cage as if drawn more by the low-level electromagnetic field it emitted than by the food in the water. One of them banged hard off the bars, sending a percussive wave rippling through the water. Others nearly managed to slide between the cage bars and had to be either prodded free by Benchley or pulled out by their tails. Within minutes more blues began to appear, many of them good-sized adults with lengths of nearly eight feet. They took the chum that fell from the boat and the bait which Suzy tossed as though they expected it. They were bold and completely unafraid of humans but not belligerent, though some of them, hungry and confused by the blood and guts in the water, approached the divers and bit at the mail. Their motile jaws exposed row after row of razor sharp teeth that tangled in the impenetrable armor and they thrashed about, wrestling to free themselves.

The motion in the water alerted still other blues in the region and as the minutes passed the number of sharks around the cage swelled until there were dozens of them swimming in and out of the shadows. They disappeared then reappeared out of the darkness in a graceful dance around the divers, moving like sleek machines in slow-motion, taking turns on half their body length to snatch the food that drifted in the water. The men swam among them expertly, keeping alert for any behavior that would signal a change in the sharks' demeanor from passive to aggressive. There was none, and so for nearly an hour the elegant and dangerous dance continued: the cage rocked in the swell, the sharks swarmed, Howard Hall was bitten again and again and Waterman, with Cranston kicking the boldest sharks away from him, shot the scene. Finally, at Waterman's signal, the divers returned to the surface.

Back on the deck of the Bottom Scratcher the divers were euphoric. Neither Suzy nor Benchley had ever been in a cage surrounded by that number of sharks, and dive masters Hall and Cranston, who regularly work the area, said they hadn't had a day like that in years. Waterman was beside himself as well, but for a different reason: he'd come to film an area in which the blue shark population has been decimated by gill net fisheries and wound up with a lens full of them.

"I filmed this region nearly 15 years ago for a picture called Blue Water/White Death," he said, "and thought that if we filmed it again we might see three or four blues, enough to make the environmental point that yesterday there were hundreds but today there are only a handful. It just fell out that we had a terrific day and the sharks came around." He laughed. "Of course once it started happening the action was so irresistible that I couldn't just turn the camera away to find an angle where there would only be one poor shark coming our way."

Waterman's eyes light up when he speaks of the irresistibility of filming the shark action. He has been filming sharks all over the world for nearly 40 years and has never grown tired of it. "They're beautiful to watch," he says simply, "They're the most wonderful hunters."

His work during those years has included documentary footage for every major US network, the BBC in England, National Geographic, Audubon, and The American Sportsman, as well as cinematography for commercial films such as Peter Benchley's The Deep. He has garnered five Emmy awards and every major award presented by the diving world in North America and the UK. He is a noted adventurer, environmentalist, lecturer and eloquent spokesman for the sea and her life forms. Despite all of those accomplishments, however, Waterman remains a name most of us don't know.

So who is Stanton Waterman, and how did he come to love sharks?

Born in 1923, Waterman was raised in New Jersey and began diving as a schoolboy in the cold waters off the coast of Maine,

where his family had a summer house. "I always loved the water," he says, "but the first real turning point in my career—looking back on it—occurred when I was thirteen and on holiday with my family in Palm Beach. Friends of my parents had been in Japan and returned with a pearl diver's mask for me. Now at that time there were no diving masks, there was nothing but goggles and they were impractical because they distorted your vision. So that mask really opened up the sea to me."

During WWII he enlisted in the Navy and was stationed in the Canal Zone. "There were some fellows from California in my squadron and they'd been diving for abalone out there so we started diving together. Then a guy named Kilpatrick made the first rubber fins and sent me a pair to try out. It was a whole new experience skin diving with them. You literally flew in the water!"

Following his Navy stint Waterman returned to the States and enrolled in Dartmouth University, where he majored in Shakespeare. He later did graduate work at Columbia in Political Science and planned on a life of adventure in the foreign service. That plan changed when he fell in love with his future wife, Suzy. After he and Suzy were married they moved to Maine and Waterman became a blueberry farmer to support his family, which soon included three children—two boys, Gordy and Gar, and a girl, Suzy. "And then, in 1949, Jacques Cousteau invented the Aqualung," he says. "Now imagine that you've already spent half your life skin diving and then there's the advent of an air supply you could take underwater with you. I was absolutely enthralled!"

Waterman bought the first Aqualung ever sold in Maine. In his archives there's a film that his wife Suzy took of him walking into the pond behind their house on a cold November day in 1951 and disappearing beneath the frigid water. "That may well be the first film ever taken in North America of a man doing that with a wet suit and a tank on," he laughs. "I didn't do much, just sat on a rock and breathed underwater, but it was a whole new world from that moment on."

The following year he saw an article by Cousteau in the National Geographic on diving in the Red Sea. "That was the genesis of the whole idea of earning a living from doing what I wanted. I thought now here's a man who does these kinds of things. Was he some kind of tropic character or just a man with the enterprise to try something different and make it work? Well, that incubus thought grew into the idea of building a boat and outfitting it for diving."

He contacted a local boat-building yard and had them start work on his dream. While it was being built he took a trip to the Caribbean to scout for an area to set up shop as a diving guide. He picked Nassau because he had a skin diving mentor there, secured a house, and the following winter, after blueberry season was over, the Watermans set off for the tropics.

"I started out doing business with the recreation directors at the hotels, but on very short order the word got out because we were just about the only game in town for this new sport."

Just before the start of their second season a company that manufactured diving gear loaned Waterman the first 16mm camera designed for shooting underwater in the hopes that some of his customers might want to buy one. "It wasn't very practical but it worked," he says, "and I used it constantly. For the next few years we lived in Nassau during the winter and returned to Maine for the blueberry season. After three years of that I put together a ninety minute film called Waterworld, culled from the best footage I had and organized a speaking tour with it."

Before long Waterman had developed a small lecture circuit which eventually blossomed into more than 100 dates a season and allowed him to give up the cold Maine winters. More importantly, he caught the eye of museum directors, expedition organizers and researchers who began to contract him to shoot for them. But it wasn't just his camera work they were after, it was his persona. He seemed to know the sea better than anyone else and was able to impart his love for it to people who had never set foot in the ocean.

"Stan is a poet; he understands philosophy and thinks about things," says David Dubolet, one of the world's premier underwater still photographers and a former protege of Waterman's. "It's a very powerful thing to have someone say 'You cannot just jump into the sea and appreciate it without the ability and sensitivity to make observations on the land.' Over the years he's not just made movies, he's lent his vision to a whole generation of divers."

\*\*\*\*\*

Waterman, an old fashioned New England gentleman with a set jaw and clear deep eyes, was sitting in his office, a recently converted one-car garage attached to his rural New Jersey home. On one freshly whitewashed wall hung a framed world map with pin indicators of his favorite diving sites. On a shelf below the map sat his five Emmys; on the floor were dozens of dive awards he has yet to find a place for. Around the small room were momentos of some of his adventures: an amphora from an ancient wreck; conch shells from a year he spent with his family in Tahiti; an old metal diving helmet; and the Japanese pearl diver's mask he received more than 50 years ago. He was talking about sharks.

"The blues are easy to work with. They can actually be manhandled and diverted, so they're popular with film makers. Which doesn't mean they're not potentially dangerous. All sharks are dangerous. Of course the big ones are more dangerous. Tiger sharks, for instance, grow very large, maybe 20 feet, and because they are so large and can take prey the size of human beings, humans are much more vulnerable to them.

"Sharks don't eat humans, of course, that's just a myth," he laughs; "but they will take a bite. Not even the great whites are likely to attack in most circumstances but they are curious. Pelagic sharks, open ocean species, will generally circle you and watch and if they are interested they'll bump up against you to get a feel for you, and then finally try a bite. They can be poled off and



