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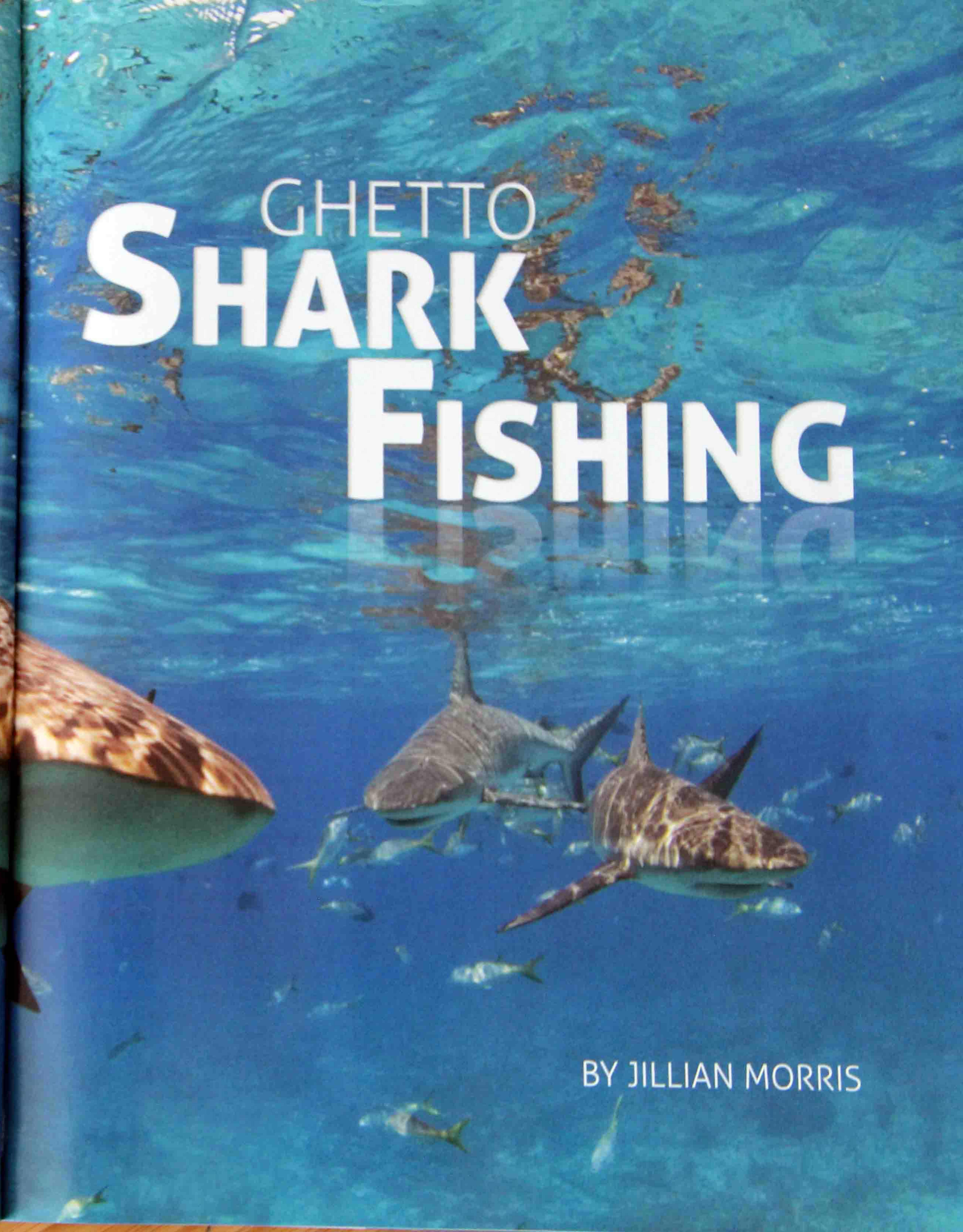
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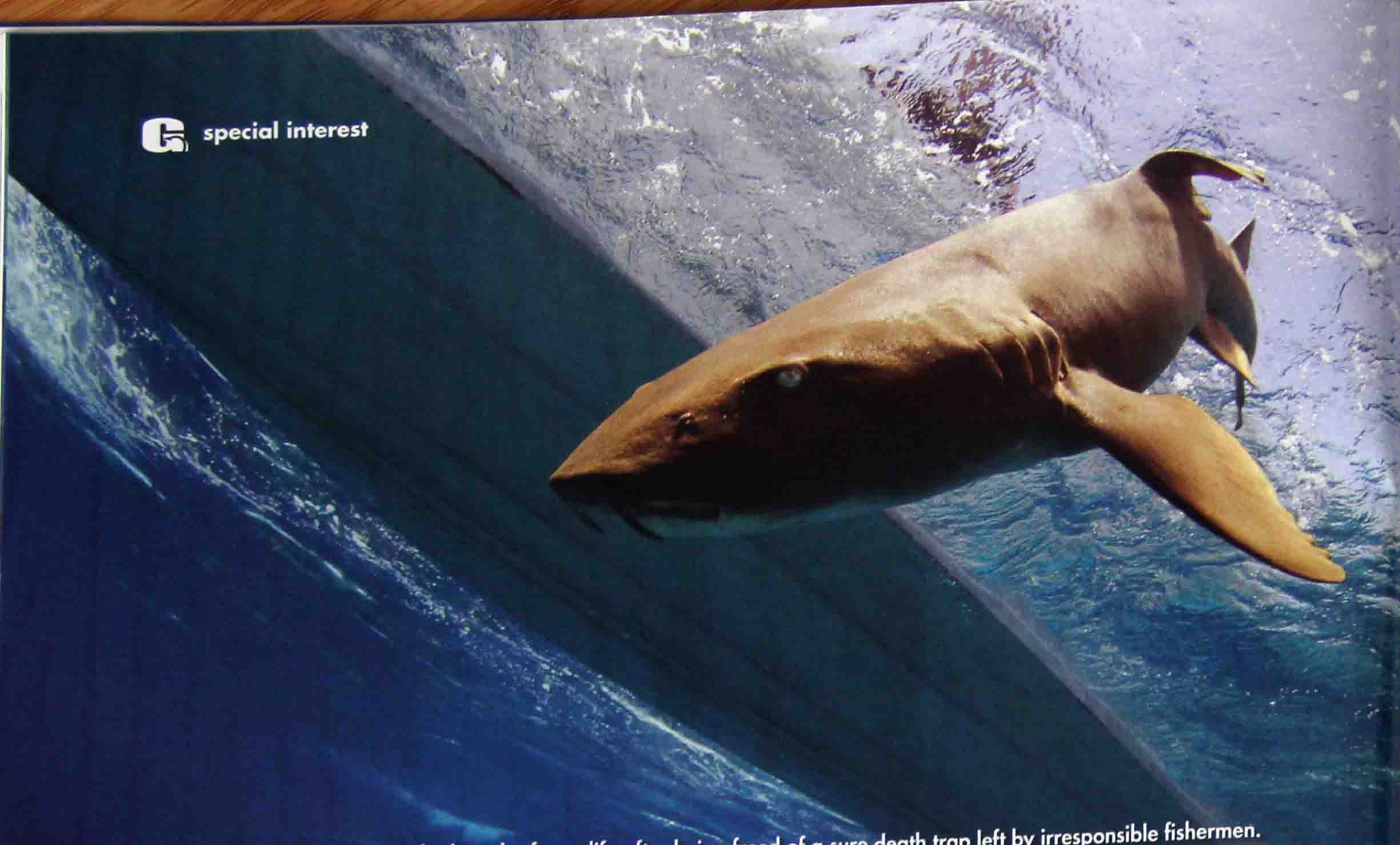
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# GHETTO SHARK FISHING



BY JILLIAN MORRIS



This nurse shark received a breath of new life after being freed of a sure death trap left by irresponsible fishermen.

Bimini has big game fishing as deeply rooted in its history as Hemingway and rum. The black and white photos that once adorned the walls of The Compleat Angler (Ernest Hemingway's old haunt for drinking and thinking) and now on the walls of The Bimini Big Game Club, reflect the glory days of this fishing mecca.

Bimini has an extensive mangrove system in the Bahamas and provides a nursery for juvenile fish, conch, lobster and sharks. The Gulf Stream brings in nutrient-rich water from great depths and the result is a diverse and dense underwater world. Its proximity to Florida has made Bimini a popular destination for weekend fishermen hopping across the "stream" to attend one of the numerous fishing tournaments Bimini holds each year. Historically it is also a place of legend where many fisherman and new captains cut their teeth on tuna, sailfish, wahoo and Mahi Mahi. Guy Harvey has reopened the Bimini Big Game Club and restored energy to the island that, like so many places, has fallen victim to the

economic down slide.

Bimini also holds a parallel and equally rich history of shark conservation. Samuel "Doc" Gruber established the world-renowned Bimini Biological Field Station (Sharklab) in 1990 as a base for his work with lemon sharks. The lab is continuously in the forefront of groundbreaking research, providing answers to the enigma that surrounds the world's understanding of these animals. Gaining crucial insight to the shark, their behaviors and needs is necessary to ensure their survival and thus the survival of our oceans. Sharks are apex predators that keep the oceans clean. The system does not function without them and oceans across the globe are realizing the consequences of this devastation.

Having lived on Bimini, I still hold this pint-sized paradise in my heart. On a recent return trip I was eager to slip beneath the surface and explore one of my favorite places on the planet. My fiancé and I, along with two friends, rented a boat from the Bimini Sands Marina and made plans for a day of diving, spear fishing and

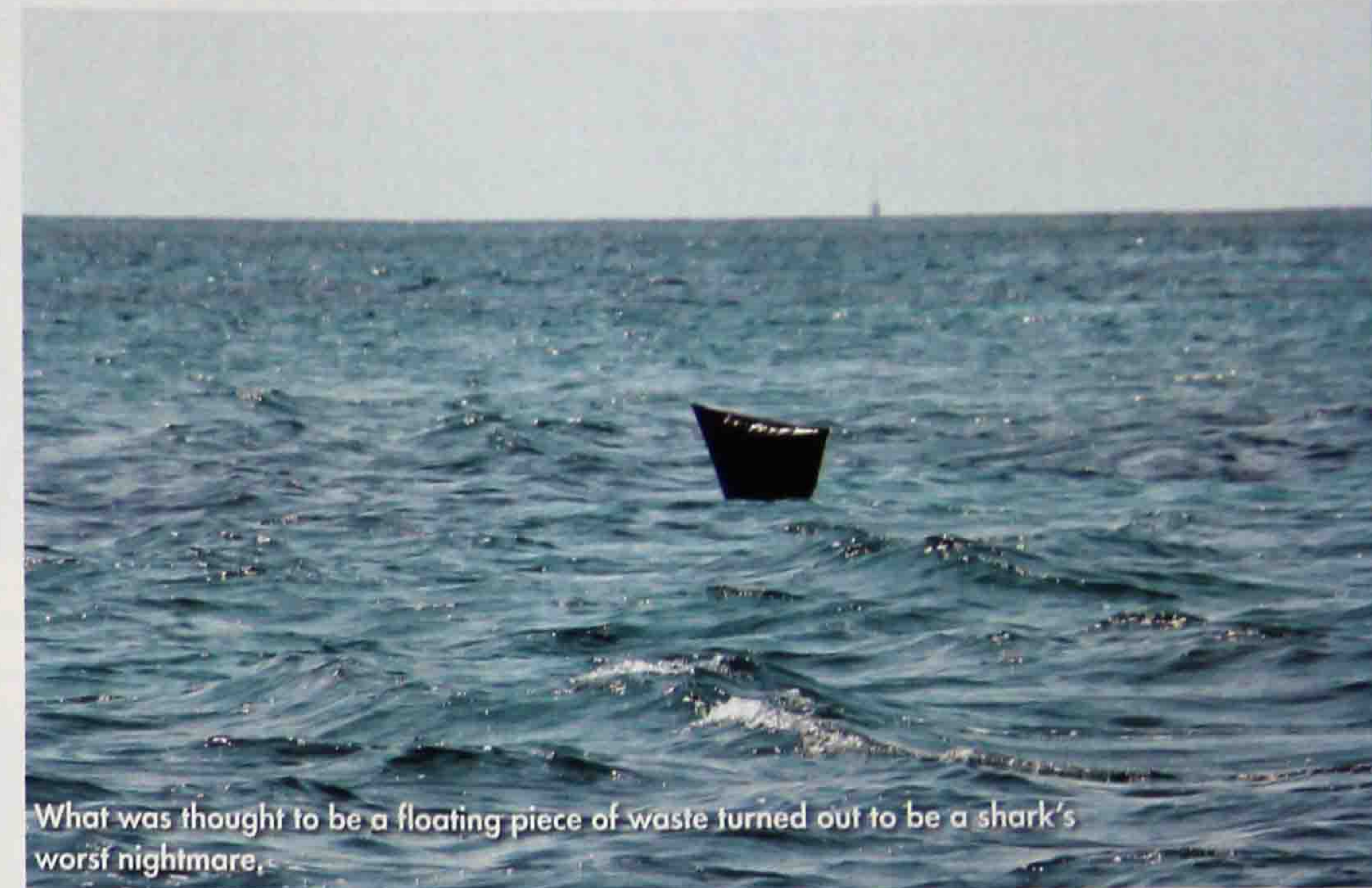
exploration. As we cleared the channel and headed south, Dony spotted a large black trash bag on the surface. He suggested we grab it because it might be a million dollars from a drug drop. "That's how they do it," he insisted. For a tiny island, Bimini has a very colorful history including some less than legal activities. Money or not, we motored over to pick up the trash that someone felt the need to dump in the ocean.

We pulled along side the bag and he wrestled with it. There was a piece of fishing line attached and we assumed it was stuck on the sea floor. Typical boaters trash – bait scraps and used bits of fishing line. Dony struggled a bit so Duncan took a turn at trash removal duty. He quickly realized that the tugging was not from being snagged on the bottom, but from a shark that was hooked on the other end of the line. While throwing the boat into neutral we quickly went into shark-tagging mode. Duncan and I, both marine biologists specializing in sharks, have spent thousands of hours working with these animals. We moved like a well-oiled machine,

knowing exactly what needed to happen in order to free this animal. Our momentary rage was replaced by action as I grabbed my gloves and pulled the massive 9-foot nurse shark to the surface as it began to roll. Nurse sharks, although docile when resting on the bottom, should never be underestimated. They are extremely powerful both in and out of the water, with a pound-for-pound bite stronger than any other shark.

Dony and Michelle were in awe and quickly grabbed the cameras. I held the shark steady while Duncan looked for a tool to remove the hook. All we had on board was a small Leatherman – less than ideal – but we had to get the shark off the line. I grabbed the dorsal fin in an attempt to secure the animal next to the boat. The healthy male nurse shark was still in good condition and put up quite a fight, wanting nothing to do with our effort to help him. I switched places with Duncan in order to get a tail rope on the animal and secure it next to the boat. In a standard tagging workup, the animal is secured at both ends, reducing its stress and allowing the data to be collected quickly and efficiently. Duncan pulled him to the surface and with one strong roll the hook was free and he was gone. I admit we were pretty happy that we didn't have to put the animal through anything else in order to free him. Without the proper equipment the task was quite a challenge.

We inspected the bag and realized that this was not trash that accidentally attracted a shark, but a makeshift shark fishing rig. The heavy-duty trash bag was tied in a knot and the high-test fishing line was wrapped around and attached with a fishing knot. Line ran to a weight followed by another length of line and a J hook with a scrap of bait still on it. The equipment was good quality and looked to be brand new. We have encountered block rigs before on a site that is used for shark diving and research. The culprits used car batteries and cinder blocks tied to wire leaders



What was thought to be a floating piece of waste turned out to be a shark's worst nightmare.

and large rusted J hooks. This was a different technique, but had the same target: sharks, and both are illegal. The sick part is that the "fishermen" might not even come looking for the bags. This leaves trash and an injured or dying animal drifting in the sea until it hooks onto a rock or washes onto shore. We looked around to see

if any boats were nearby or watching us, but it was a busy weekend with the mutton snapper running and there were boats everywhere.

We motored along heading toward our dive site and spotted another black bag floating at the surface. Duncan and I told our friends to be prepared because the end result of



The evidence of careless, wasteful fishing practices.