

**BOOK REVIEW**

# Book review of *The lives of sharks: A natural history of shark life*

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The shark is a fish. Oh, but what a glorious fish it is! Feared by some, venerated by others, reviled by some fishers, a desirable target for others... it is difficult to think of another organism on the planet that stirs such a broad range of emotions. Although primitive in an evolutionary sense, the shark is a masterpiece of construction, with adaptations that are well suited to a broad range of environments. Sharks are found in the warmest tropical seas, in cold polar oceans, are among the deepest inhabitants of the oceans, and if the science can be believed, among the longest-lived of all animals. How have they managed to survive and prosper as a group over hundreds of millions of years, while many of their unique characteristics have remained unchanged? This is one of several questions that Abel and Grubbs consider in their book, *The Lives of Sharks: A Natural History of Shark Life*.

Drawing from, and adapted from their 2020 book, *Shark Biology and Conservation: Essentials for Educators, Students and Enthusiasts*, the magnificent collection of photographs in *The Lives of Sharks* would, by itself, qualify this as one of the finest coffee table book on sharks that are available. But this was not intended to be a simple coffee table book. Rather, it attempts to bridge the gap between photographic delights, introductory textbooks and natural history guides. The introductory chapter describing the delighted responses of students at the Bimini Shark Lab when faced with their first shark snorkelling foray was so well written as to make you think that you were actually there, and sharing in the excitement. Subsequent chapters adopt more of a factual tone, with descriptions of shark evolution and diversity, adaptations, and ecology, before moving onto chapters about sharks in the open ocean, deep sea, estuaries and rivers, and continental shelves. The final chapter is entitled *Sharks and Us*, with lay descriptions of how we help and hurt sharks, plus general overviews of the impacts of overfishing, bycatch, and climate change. This chapter in particular is very USA-centric, presumably targeted at the largest readership, with case studies and examples drawn largely from the East Coast of the USA.

Interweaved within each of the chapters are a half dozen or so short species summaries representative of the chapter title. These species summaries are written more in field guide format, providing distinguishing anatomical and biological characteristics as well as IUCN classifications. And of course, all of them include those spectacular photographs, almost all of which were taken in their natural environment. Subsections within each of the chapters describe individual topics, some of which were also described in other chapters. For example, the chapter on estuarine sharks includes a subsection on Threats, which actually provided more information on overfishing and habitat degradation than the chapter *Sharks and Us*. For this reason, it would be challenging to use this book as an information source on a particular topic, since each topic is often dispersed through several locations in the book.

Although the topic coverage was fairly complete on a general level, there were some curious omissions. For those new to shark biology, a description of the electroreception capabilities of the ampullae of Lorenzini would have been helpful. Other sensory capabilities are described without the everyday comparisons suited for a lay publication; for example, how do the shark's sense of vision and smell compare with those of a dog or human? But perhaps more importantly, there were no suggested answers to the questions that might be uppermost in the minds of many readers; how do I minimize the probability of shark attack? Personally, I prefer the approach of counting how many of my children return from the water before I venture in. But a more serious suggestion might have included avoidance of ocean waters at dusk and dawn when predators typically hunt. Spear fishermen are the most common target of attacks in many waters, but this is not mentioned. In tropical waters, avoidance of estuaries reduces the risk of contact with the often aggressive bull shark. In fairness though, no publication can cover all topics.

This book is best suited for a general audience with an interest in sharks, but little prior knowledge. It could easily serve as a coffee table book. It could also serve as a high school-level text. For the shark or fish biologist though, the value is in photos which depict many species of sharks living their regular everyday lives, rather than the usual sensationalistic shark attack photos. Personally, I intend to keep my copy within easy reach, where I can use its stunning photos to better explain shark principles to students and visitors.

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