

Great White Shark: Myth and Reality

By Alexandrine Civard-Racinais. Photographs by Patrice Héraud. 2017. Firefly Books. 144 pages, 19.95 CAD, Paper.

I have read many good books by the publisher of this book, but, “Firefly ... your luciferase was low for this one”. This book just did not glow. I read this book in one three-hour stint, making comments in my notebook regarding errors, misleading/difficult text, and contradictions. I filled more than two pages.

The book is divided into three sections: “Portrait of the Great White”, which largely covers the species’ anatomy; “Searching for the Great White”, a description of the conservation efforts, including techniques used to identify and track the sharks; and “Requiem for the Great White?”, which is about the relationship between this fish and humans, from attacks to ecotourism.

It is the first section of the book which dominates my notebook entries; this is not surprising given that (a) there is no indication that the author has any background in anatomy and (b) the reviewer does. However, some responsibility must lie with the publisher who should have had the manuscript reviewed prior to publication. One ludicrous example should suffice. Most bony fishes have gas bladders to help adjust their buoyancy; sharks and their allies do not. Sharks store oil in their livers, and it is this low-density oil which provides one of several mechanisms by which sharks maintain their position in the water column. There is no *pool* of oil, rather it is distributed within the liver’s cells. And yet the author claims, “This oil allows sharks to adjust their buoyancy and move rapidly up and down without expending much energy” (p. 24). Just how

would they do that ... spit out the oil to make them sink? And what could they do to “rapidly move up” ... very quickly synthesize more oil from a denser substrate in their bodies?

One of the themes of the book is to educate the reader that although the Great White Shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*) is a top predator, some of its behaviours (e.g., curiosity) have been misinterpreted as aggression. The author wants to dispel the rhetoric which gives this animal its bad name. Why then, in a caption, does the author refer to the shark as “marauding”, especially when there is no evidence in the picture that the shark is doing anything but swimming?

I found the second and third sections of the book interesting and less riddled with errors. The story of the formation of the Fox Shark Research Foundation and a description of its work was both motivating and satisfying. The research vessel, tools of the trade (shark cages, transmitters, and more), and some of the neighbouring wildlife were nicely described and photographed. The photography is excellent throughout: repetitive (how many jaw-agape photos does one need in a shark book?), but excellent.

This book is easy to read and aesthetically pleasing owing to the copious photographs. It could have been a great book, but unfortunately, just isn’t.

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