

Flying Sharks: a captive shark's tale

João Correia
Flying Sharks
www.flyingsharks.eu

I was recently having dinner with my 10 year old cousin, who suddenly shouted "Did I hear you order the Cod?? Are you insane?? Don't you know those things are nearly extinct??" You will be glad to know my cousin's rage wasn't targeted at me but to a rather flushed mother, who suddenly realized her evil ways and quickly changed her order to a much more respectable steak. Well done.

Santiger Shark in a public aquarium. © Andy McClenaghan.

I laughed at the scene and asked my cousin where she heard about Cod being nearly extinct, to which she replied "Well, at the Oceanário, of course, dummy. You should know better, you do work there after all..." I couldn't help smiling when I heard that. Indeed, the Oceanário's exhibits, as many other fine public aquaria around the world, have a strong emphasis on education and conservation, and it's always nice to see environmentally-sound advice at work.

But the public need to be going through the admission gates if we are to educate that public. And that's where animal collectors come in. Between 1999 and 2005 I had the privilege of being Oceanário's curator of collections, and bringing in interesting animals was my number one priority. I subsequently became a consultant for the Oceanário and started my own private collections and consulting business, which allows me to dedicate some time to teaching as well, one of the best jobs you can possibly have.

Typically animals will arrive under the following circumstances:

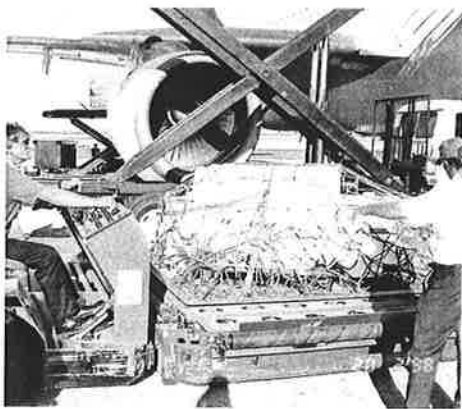
COLLECTIONS FROM THE WILD

This is probably the most enjoyable part of a collector's job. You prepare a (very) long checklist, revise your equipment, revise it again, make sure all the legal aspects and permits are in order, you hop on a van, or plane, and go in the water to collect the animals. The job took me to the Algarve (Portugal's Southernmost region), Cape Town, Baja California, Vancouver, Seattle, Portland, Key West, Key Marathon and other amazing places, where we would rendezvous with the guys who did the collecting and set up huge operations whereby the animals would be flown in to Lisbon.

I use the word 'huge' because I can't think of another adjective to describe an operation that involves putting together forty or fifty 1.6 ~ 2.4 m diameter transport tanks (including filtration), ensuring they are 100% leak proof, loading them with water and animals, and placing them inside cargo Boeing 747s. If you're ever given the chance, make sure you don't pass out on the opportunity of flying inside a large cargo aircraft. Who knows, you might be lucky enough to fly across the Northern lights on an MD11 loaded with Chimaeras, Rattfish, a large Giant Pacific Octopus, countless invertebrates and two Oystercatchers.

Or maybe you get to do a straight-in approach to a small runway in northern Spain in zero visibility through a blazing hailstorm. I guarantee the trails of ice particles hitting the cockpit at 250 knots is the closest you'll ever get to feeling like Han Solo whenever he punched the hyper-drive on the Millennium Falcon.





Above: SAA staff loads a tank filled with small Catsharks into a Boeing 737 in Durban, South Africa, February 1998. These fish would later be transferred to a Boeing 747 Combi, which are great for the folks accompanying the animals, who get to watch movies and order cocktails in between checks of the animals and equipment, safely stowed in the cargo compartment. The air stewardesses also tend to pay particular attention to the nice biologists travelling with the sharks and will often display a keen interest in their husbandry techniques!

MAIL ORDER COLLECTIONS

Those who aren't familiar with this field would be surprised to know that some distributing companies offer a wide range of live animals in stock. These are imported from collectors around the World and typically offered in a 'catalogue' format. The collection manager's job is as simple as selecting species from a list and faxing an order. Provided all the legal and formal veterinarian aspects are duly accounted for, the animals will show up at your doorstep a few days after ordering. But beware of cheap prices, traditionally associated to shady characters who use cyanide, explosives and other nasty collecting methods. Make positively sure that your distributor works exclusively with reputable collectors, preferably MAC (*) certified.

Below: Ensuring the filtration systems of the 60+ round transport tanks loaded inside the cargo MD11 are fully operational.



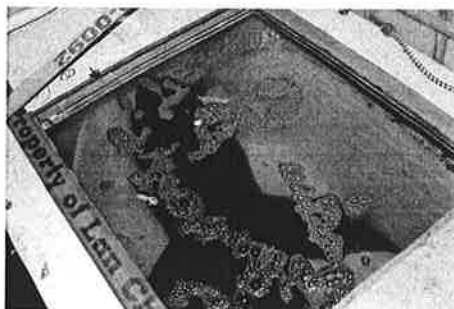
EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

Modern facilities focus their animal procurement strategy on this method. Collecting from the wild is minimized and, whenever possible, captive bred individuals are exchanged or donated amongst institutions. During my tenure as collections manager we shipped out captive bred baby Sea-otters, Magellanic Penguins, Coral cuttings, Jellyfish and Cuttlefish juveniles, as well as Catsharks from Portuguese and South-African waters. We also welcomed captive bred Inca Terns, Pot-bellied Seahorses and Coral cuttings from species different from those that we already had on display. Exchange programs are a common practice in zoological parks and are likewise becoming increasingly common in public aquariums too.

So, what do you do with these animals once they come through the door of the institution? Well, you provide them with the best possible care money can buy and make absolutely sure that they are maintained in a proper environment, as close to their natural surroundings as possible. Because these animals are the reason hundreds of millions of patrons purchase tickets to see public aquariums all over the world every year. And that is a monumentally huge responsibility, split two-fold:

- 1: *Animal welfare and good husbandry must be at the forefront of a public aquarium's philosophy;*
- 2: *Educating the public that comes through the gates is the very reason why these institutions are created.*

Long gone are the days when public aquariums were little more than a gigantic fish bowl, where families would promenade on a Sunday afternoon and simply look at sharks, rays and other marine creatures. The new Millennium brought a massive flood of environmental awareness to the public eye and large aquaria are exceptionally good at harnessing that public's interest in an engaging and fascinating way. Place 500 people in front of a 15 m wide x 7 m tall acrylic panel with real live beautiful Sandbar Sharks swimming behind it and tell them how sharks are being slaughtered for their fins. I can pretty much guarantee not one of them will ever order shark fin soup again in their lives.



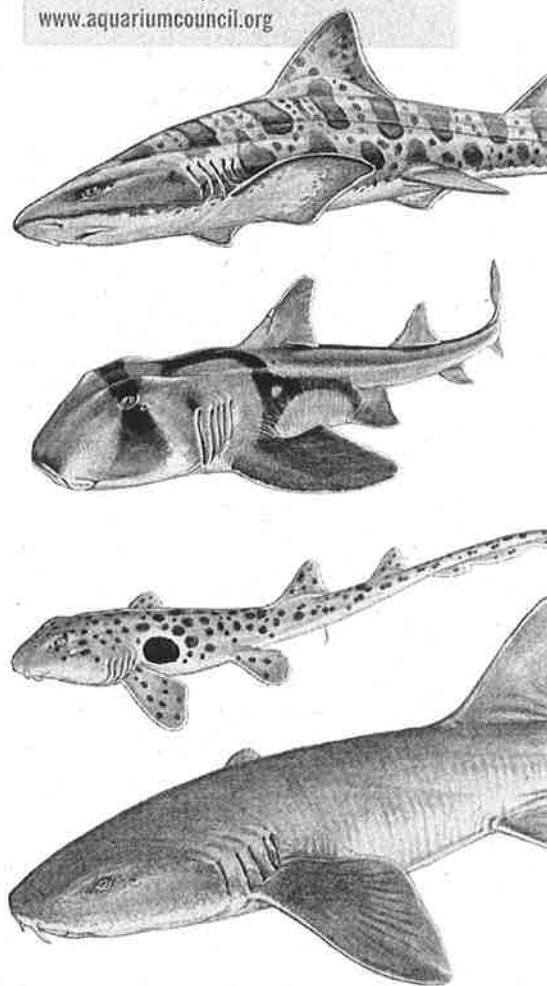
Above: Sandbar Shark *Carcharhinus plumbeus* inside shark box used to move it from Marathon Key to Lisbon, in August 1999. Shark boxes are fitted with pumps that filter the water continuously and also drive clean water directly into the shark's mouth, assisting its breathing. Sharks are mildly sedated in transit and can be transported in this fashion up to approximately 48 hours. Check out www.flyingsharks.eu for multiple publications on live marine animals transportation techniques.

JOÃO'S FINAL THOUGHTS

Words and pictures will never replace the awe that strikes a crowd when they see a Great White Shark swimming past them behind a window, as they do at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Or spark what goes on inside a child's psyche when a 3.5 metre wide giant Manta Ray blocks the sun as it gently glides behind the transparent wall their tiny hands are pressing on. Live animals touch you emotionally in a way that posters or graphics never will.

So, people often ask me if I am comfortable catching sharks, rays and other fish for a living. After having dinner with my 10 year old cousin, how could I not be?

(*) MAC: Marine Aquarium Council, www.aquariumcouncil.org



Four sharks seen in public aquariums in this country.
From the top:

- Leopard Shark *Triakis semifasciata*.
- Port Jackson Shark *Heterodontus portusjacksoni*.
- Epaulette Shark *Hemiscyllium ocellatum*.
- Nurse Shark *Ginglymostoma cirratum*.

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