

What Happened to the Hammerheads of “El Bajo” in La Paz, Mexico?

Gill-nets are destroying one of the world's “Seven Underwater Wonders”

By Johnny Friday

Known to divers around the world as El Bajo, this famous seamount located on the fringe of La Paz Bay is where Dr. Peter Klimley first discovered schooling hammerhead sharks in the 1970's. The first amazing underwater images of this phenomenon were filmed here by filmmakers such as Stan Waterman and Howard Hall in the early 1980's. Over the next decade, El Bajo was the premier dive destination in the world for divers to encounter schooling hammerhead sharks. El Bajo was a top five diving destination and truly an underwater wonder of the world. Then, in the mid 1990's the shark schools became smaller and smaller. Now they're nearly gone. I think I know why.



La Paz Mexico was the top dive spot in the world for seeing hammerhead sharks in the early 1980s. Now it's not even rated in the top twenty

Some people think the sharks have just stopped migrating here. Another theory blames the pressure of gill-net fishing in the Sea of Cortez, together with commercial fishermen specifically targeting sharks in the open sea. However, although I don't yet have detailed empirical proof, I'm reasonably sure the real culprit is right here in the Bay of La Paz.

In 2002 Mike McGettigan of Sea Watch told me about a juvenile shark fishery in the Bay of La Paz. Until recently, however, I hadn't really seen much evidence of it. I had often seen the remnants of baby hammerhead fins and heads on El Mogote beach, but nothing in any disturbing quantities. Having spent over six years filming just about every illegal fishing practice from gillnetting and long-lining to commercial spear-fishermen using hookah, I have seen my fair share of devastation. However, nothing could have prepared me for the absolutely senseless destruction of newborn hammerhead sharks that I witnessed firsthand.



The Bay of La Paz is also one of the few known rearing grounds for Whale Sharks, which are a big dollar tourist draw for La Paz

As the Sea of Cortez's commercial fishery has declined, fishermen must travel farther, stay out at sea longer, and use more fuel. For many, the expense of traveling to distant fishing grounds for a meager catch just doesn't make sense. A number of fishermen from La Paz have decided to set their gillnets in outer La Paz Bay during the winter months. They know the nets will fill with newborn sharks at this time of year, and that even though the small sharks are nearly worthless, they will be able to make a little money because their operating costs are also very low. According to one shark



fisherman, there are approximately 20 pangas that set their gillnets to specifically target these sharks.

100s of baby hammerhead sharks are killed in gillnets every month in front of mega development “Paraiso del Mar”

Unfortunately, this is a critical shark nursery for the Hammerheads of El Bajo.

The Bay of La Paz and El Mogote (the sand peninsula in front of the city of La Paz) are a perfect sanctuary to these newborn sharks. It is a nursery, a safe haven devoid of predators and high in food concentrations that fuel the newborn sharks to maturity. Due to the biological and geographical characteristics of the Bay, the region is ideal for several shark species, including the whale shark who utilize these waters to drop their young and allow them to thrive within the nutrient rich waters. Little is known of the nursing grounds in La Paz, but empirical data suggests that this is an important pupping area for hammerheads as well as whale sharks and whitenose sharks.



Photo by Terry Maas for Sea watch

Typically the shark fishermen set their gillnets and come back within 1-2 days to pull them up. They clean their catch to the outer beaches of El Mogote where they are less likely to be seen. However, on windy days they must return to the inner Bay of La Paz to clean their catch on the inside beaches of El Mogote. They try to avoid this as much as possible for fear of photos and confrontations with passersby.

Although many of them have permits to fish using gillnets, few (if any) have permits to fish sharks. On a good day, each panga can haul in upwards of a hundred or more juvenile sharks. On the day I was there, one panga, with one fisherman and only one gillnet, was able to kill over one hundred and thirty juvenile sharks. Ninety percent were hammerhead sharks.



The heads and entrails of 100s of baby sharks line the beaches of the new "Paraiso del Mar" resort on Mogote Island in La Paz Photo - Johnny Friday

Although El Mogote and the Bay of La Paz are protected from bottom dragging shimmers, they are not protected from panga gill-netters and panga long-liners. The economic benefits to Mexico and the citizens of La Paz from these pangas are negligible. The economic benefits lost through the destruction of so many juvenile hammerheads are enormous.



Will the officials of La Paz stop this destruction and save the nursery and rearing grounds of this magnificent shark?

La Paz was once one of the top five dive destinations in the world. Divers from all over the globe used to visit to dive with and

photograph hammerhead sharks at dive locations such as “El Bajo” and “Las Animas”. Now, La Paz does not even rate in the top twenty locations. Divers and dive clubs now travel to other locations such as Costa Rica and the Galapagos islands where sharks receive protection and divers spend their dollars.

Is there a chance for hammerhead sharks to recover in La Paz? Absolutely, it is not too late, but the clock is ticking. If panga gill-netters continue their plunder of baby sharks in the Bay of La Paz, these animals may be exterminated forever. Divers and eco-tourists will have no reason to travel to La Paz to see them and **infuse** tourism dollars into the local economy. It is a colossal economic mistake to allow a small group of fishermen to continue the annual decimation of each generation of juvenile hammerhead sharks. It is in Mexico’s interest to protect these nursing grounds and encourage the repopulation of the very animals that made La Paz famous in the world's diving community. There are only a few known places in the world that can lay claim to having a hammerhead shark nursery in their back yard. La Paz is one of them. With very simple fisheries management, La Paz can reclaim the economic value that comes with the nearly magical attraction of the magnificent and unique sharks.

Mexico has proven itself a world leader in recognizing its valuable environmental resources, moving swiftly to protect and restore them. One need only look back on the recent threat of a salt works to San Ignacio Lagoon and the juvenile gray whale nursery as an example.

Now Mexico must move boldly to protect the hammerheads of La Paz, one of the world's most remarkable sharks and a precious national treasure. Only by protecting this vital nursery will the hammerhead sharks of La Paz return.



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