

The Day I Saved a Life

By Thomas Ponce

We've all seen Hollywood's depiction of sharks, the media's over-dramatization of shark attacks and felt that pit in our stomach at the sight of a shark. Movies like *Jaws*, *Day of The Shark*, *Shark Night*, *Deep Blue Sea* etc., give us the impression of a mindless killing machine out to kill all human beings. Well, I've seen another side of the shark and I've seen it up close and personal.

It all started on December 16, 2011, my birthday. My family took me to Venice Beach, which is also known as Shark Tooth Beach. This was the trip I had been waiting for. I had seen this location on the Discovery Channel over a year ago and had wanted to go ever since. Having the opportunity to find fossilized shark teeth that have been in the waters for over millions of years was something I was ecstatic about! When we arrived at our destination, I was amazed at all the sights, sounds and smells. The water was crystal clear and blue and the sand was so warm between my toes. The occasional breeze whisked my mind away to a beautiful tropical paradise. It was a perfect day to go sifting for shark teeth. I walked into the water up to my knees, sifter in hand, and began sifting. I dug my scooper into the sand, beneath the water, and pulled up many small teeth. I found great white teeth, bull shark teeth, tiger shark teeth and a few I was unsure about, it was amazing. Then it happened. I hit the jackpot! I discovered in my scoop the largest tooth I had ever seen. It was four inches long and black in color. Its edges were serrated and you could still see the gum line. The great white teeth I found paled in comparison to this massive tooth. It was a Megalodon tooth! My dream had come true, I had found one! This was the best birthday present I could have ever gotten, or so I thought.

As we were leaving the beach a friendly local had told us about a pier close by that was a perfect place to watch the sunset. I was determined to see the green flash that everyone talks about when the sun sets. We headed back to our hotel to change and then went straight to the pier. The view from the pier was miraculous. The skies were clear and the weather was perfect for being outside, not too hot and there was a cool breeze coming off the water. As we watched the sunset, the sky turned orange and pink as the sun went down. It was absolutely breathtaking! In the water we saw dolphins swimming and a man painting sea turtles at the edge of the pier. It was a night right out of a novel.

As we were leaving the pier I saw a fisherman pull a baby Bonnet-head shark up on his line. He pulled him onto the pier, hooting and hollering about his catch and how he was "going to eat tonight". The fisherman then started sharpening his very large knife, readying himself to gut the shark right then and there. The shark flapped and shook, grasping to hold onto life. It was horrible to see. I knew I had to do something, so I approached the fisherman and asked him to set the shark free. I explained how it was a living creature, a baby with a family and

that it deserved to live. I explained to him the important role sharks play in our ecosystem. I pleaded with him to free him and not eat him. I even offered to buy him dinner. I told him how sharks are keystone predators and how they keep the ocean ecosystem in balance, I explained about their slow reproductive rate and how we needed every shark in the ocean to keep it healthy. I explained how the effects of removing sharks would be felt throughout the ecosystem like a domino effect I was not letting up, I knew I had to keep fighting for that shark. After what seemed like an eternity, the fisherman finally conceded and told me that I could set him free. I couldn't believe it, I did it! I immediately walked over, picked up the shark and placed him back into the water and told him to live free. I swear the shark looked at me with gratitude. He was alive because I spoke up for him and he knew it. I saw the understanding in his eyes and knew there was much more to sharks than what I had been led to believe.

That day changed me forever and now I fight for sharks rights. I have always been an active animal and environmental advocate and a vegetarian and now vegan. I had run many fundraisers for farm animals and spaying and neutering your pets, leafletted about animals in captivity and in vivisection labs I had signed petitions against animal cruelty and protested at various sites where cruelty had been taking place, but until that day I hadn't really concentrated my efforts on sharks. I started doing some research and I watched a documentary called Sharkwater and it gave me insight into the plight of the shark. It showed me the horrors they faced due to the finning industry. They were being killed in huge quantities for their fins and were becoming extremely close to extinction. The sharks are stripped of their fins then discarded, while still alive, back into the ocean. It was a horrible discovery and one that moved me to act and speak up for the sharks. From that moment on I have dedicated myself to making as many people aware of what's going on with sharks as I can. My hope is that through educating people on the cruel and inhumane acts being done to sharks and by explaining the importance of sharks to the ocean ecosystem, as well as our own environment that I can make a difference in helping to preserve this beautiful species. I hope to one day soon be speaking at Congress on behalf of sharks and lobbying to bring change to the finning laws in our country.

December 16, 2011 the ocean gave me two gifts, a Megalodon tooth and an appreciation and love of sharks. In return, I gave it back one of its own and a voice that could be heard and would never be silenced.