Expedition Log

Feb 22, 2013

Well it’s day 1 of Expedition Jacksonville 2013. We are out here on the spot in about 55 feet of water. The water is 62 degrees. We are near a couple of wrecks in a pretty significant area. We’ve got all of the chum set up and heading out. We’ve got everybody rehearsed. We now know how we are going to move around the shark and handle all the procedures we need to perform in order to get all the scientists the samples that they need. It’s an exciting time right now. Hopefully we will maintain good weather and have a successful trip.

Feb 23, 2013

Today was our first full day out on the water.... day two of the expedition. We had great weather conditions today. The wind was howling last night. We had a storm surge come through last night that was blowing 35 or 40. A lot of the little boats were getting banged around. Thankfully, when we woke up this morning it was really nice. We left the OCEARCH here on a spot where we have been chumming for a couple of days. It’s fishy here.

Feb 25, 2013

We got blown off the water today. We were offshore about 10/12 miles on a couple of wrecks. We’ve been on that spot for a couple of days and were hoping it would pan out... but the wind came up big out of the east and pushed us off the spot. As a result, we moved in shore to about 2 miles off the beach of Nassau Sound where we tried to set up for the rest of the afternoon. The weather continued to build and storm swells were rolling through. We determined that the safest course of action was to move inside to Jacksonville, Florida. We came 20 miles up the river and are now parked in downtown Jacksonville on a weather hold. There are tornado and flood warning throughout the evening.

We’ve had a few people who have been watching the films we put out each evening, which is really cool because my kids have been watching them too back at home. They’ve asked us about this new blue covering on the spot tags. One of our biggest challenges is biofouling, and we are always looking to improve that. A few months ago, I was at the International Workboat Show in New Orleans and went around talking to all of the people who do coding on big ships. Some actually have wildlife computers send some of their tags to Fuji films to test these new coddings because
right now our capacity to have battery power to thatch the tag exceeds our capacity to be able to operate and minimize biofouling. So, if this (blue tag) works for five years, we will have cracked the code on the biofouling problem and we will give it to all of the other scientists to put on their turtles and all the other things they study so that they can get their data too – and that is why it is a blue-coated tag.

Feb 26, 2013

We’ve been shut down from bad weather. There is a big front coming through with multiple squalls. We are seeing all sorts of heavy wind and big rain. We are going to wait it out today (the 26th) right in downtown Jacksonville. It’s not too bad in here, but out front the seas are terrible. The weather is supposed to drop starting first thing tomorrow morning - so we are hoping to have a 5 to 6 day weather window open up starting the morning of the 27th. Right now, the key is to allow everyone to relax, have fun, and get a break off the ship. This is the way expeditioning works - you schedule a 20-day trip and you hope for 10 or 12 good days on the water. The key for those off days is to allow people to refresh themselves rather than go crazy. I think we’ve been successful here in Jacksonville in setting a relaxed tone. What we want everyone to do is recharge, reload, and get ready to head back out on the water because I think we are in for a 7 to 9 day push before the weather comes in and closes us out again. A day at the dock in Jacksonville...

Feb 27, 2013

We were able to get back out of Jacksonville, Florida this morning because the front passed through last night and the swells started to die down. We set the Contender out first thing in the morning. Brett started to snooz around in an area a little out and down called the Banana Bank. He found some life there; the lifeyest place he has seen so far. We brought the ship to meet Brett at the spot he found and we got the slick set up and going. The C-State is dropping; it’s getting nicer and nicer. The spot we are on now is extremely lifey. I feel like we are getting warmer...

Feb 28, 2013

We woke up in the morning, it was rough...and it was supposed to build over the course of the day - so we kept the ship 10 miles offshore on some wrecks. Brett, Todd and I ran to the inside in the Contender, fishing off Nassau Sound. While we were in there, the wind dropped suddenly - which gave us the opportunity to explore the wrecks 25 miles offshore (15 miles beyond where the ship was anchored up). When we headed outside it looked lifey, it was good. We immediately caught an Amberjack Banina type fish and also some large Barracuda. It was very exciting to test this outside area because it was in an area where many planes have spotted white sharks in the past. While we were fishing out there we had great weather for a few hours. About 2 hours before dark, the wind came up, forcing us to
plow back to the ship through horrible conditions. We were all in full foul weather
gear getting soaked from head to toe. Once we made it back to the ship, the weather
continued to stay up and the wind continued to blow as we went to bed that
evening.

Mar 1, 2013

We woke up this morning about 10 miles off shore on some wrecks, and the weather
was still up. It was too big for us to use the lift even if a shark came to the ship. We
moved the Contender inside again off of Nassau Sound and found a fishy area that
looked very similar to areas that we’ve had luck at in the past in Africa. We set up
with the Contender there, worked the day, and eventually called in the OCEARCH in
the afternoon. In an effort to try and find a location where we can set up a slick and
maintain it for many days in a row, we moved our entire operation inshore a few
miles off the beach (just off Nassau Sound). Brett feels that consistency and time are
our friends and if we continue to move around, it will not increase the chances of
finding that one White Shark that may be passing through the area.

Mar 3, 2013

It was a historic day off Jacksonville where we tagged and released a 2,000 lbs.
female White Shark Lydia, named after Lydia Bradley (one of the founder of Bradley
University in Puree Illinois); a good friend of Caterpillar's. The day started out with
brutal weather. We were on the anchor inside just off Nassau Sound. The wind was
blowing; there was no capacity to work any further off shore. In the morning, Brett
decided to run down toward the St. John River Jetty - around the Southside to find
some shelter behind the jetty, and see if he could fish there. We got permission to
get in there and do our thing. It was about an hour after they set up there that Lydia
showed up underneath the Contender. Clearly, she was in the area because she
showed up almost immediately after the guys started chumming. So Todd, Whitey,
and Captain Brett had to fight the fish by themselves - they were a man down. It was
total chaos, the shark went underneath the stern of the Contender, got wrapped in
the propellers, they had to lift the engines out of the water with no power, and
finally were able to free the line. Then, the shark began to tow the Contender
backward. The boat was taking on water until they were able to get the line off the
cleat, get the engines in the water, get it started, and settle into the fight with Lydia.
During that time, Jody and I left the OCEARCH, ran down in the SafeBoat to join the
Contender and help in the fight. Than, Whitey and Jody made their way back to the
OCEARCH to prep the tags and get the ship moving in our direction. I drove the
Contender along with Todd and Brett, and we waited for the Ship to arrive at the
South Jetty of the St. John’s River. Once the ship arrived and was given permission to
anchor and set up, we quickly put the buoys on the front of the shark and swung it
into the cradle first time. She came in very smoothly. We had a new protocol –
before we did anything else, we were going to put the shark on its’ back to perform
an ultrasound in order to determine if she was pregnant. So, we lifted the cradle up to stop Lydia and then once Brett got in position, we quickly dropped it back down and he rolled her on her back to where we picked her up out of the water. Our protocol went very smoothly. We got the acoustic tag on and we got a lot of blood, which Dr. Skomal was very happy about. We were also able to get all of our measurements before we got Lydia back into the water. We rolled her back onto her belly where we put the accelerometer and the spot tag on her dorsal fin, along with getting tissue samples and putting a pat tag on her. It was a huge success. In about 16 minutes, Lydia was released. She swam away very strong and we are all very anxious for her first ping. Lydia was 14.5 feet long, a little over 2,000 lbs., and 8.5 ft. girth.

It was an amazing experience for many people on the ship especially Dr. Bob Hueter of Mote Marine Lab. Dr. Hueter has been a shark biologist for over 40 years, and was able to touch a live, mature, Great White Shark for the first time in his entire life. It was truly moving to be a part of that experience as well as observing his appreciation to the absolute warriors - Brett, Todd, and Whitey - who went out in the foul weather and located this particular Great White Shark. This has truly been a historic moment here off of Jacksonville. The entire Jacksonville community has been supporting us while we've been here- which has really made all of this possible.

Mar 4, 2013

We were all kind of settling in after the great success of yesterday tag and release of Lydia. We now know everything has changed; it was possible to see a White Shark. When you head out on these expeditions, you are trying to do things that have never been done before. You keep grinding, and you keep grinding, and the uncertainty of White Sharks living in the area you are working is always there - until you see the first one. After that, everything has changed - that is what Monday felt like. We were hopeful. We thought that we might see another fish, but we didn't. We continued to work in the same area on the south side of the St. John River Jetty and we will continue to stick it out here as long as the weather holds, but nothing today. We all anxiously waited in the morning with Dr. Nick Whitney who is trying to recover an accelerometer that was supposed to detach this morning. As of now, it has not. We have not heard from its' satellite tag or its' radio frequency. For the first time in history an accelerometer was attached to a shark in Florida. The accelerometer will tell us the second by second movements of the shark and how she recovered from the tagging process. We really want to recover it because it helps us know that the shark is okay. But, why hasn't it come off yet? It's been tested, it's a new prototype tag, and anywhere in the world it pops off we should know. It was supposed to come off this morning - so that is the main concern right now. We are kind of there trying to be along side Dr. Nick Whitney until we determine where that tag is and when it comes back. You can also tell that things have changed quite a bit since Lydia’s tag and release yesterday. We are now
spending a lot more time dealing with the press, Universities, and different newspapers that want to understand what has happened of such a historic nature off the beaches of Jacksonville, Florida, and what it means for the future of sharks. This is where we leverage all the hard work we’ve done to create global awareness for the future of sharks, to ensure they have a robust future. Now, everything has changed. The first one has been caught, tagged, released, and documented. From now on, we will have a little bit more of an opening in the window into the lives of the Atlantic Great White Shark.

Mar 5, 2013

We woke up in the same spot on the south side of the southern jetty at the end of the St. John’s River. We have been here now 3 days. After catching Lydia 2 days ago, we now know that White Sharks do live here, so we are hoping that another fish will move through this spot. We woke up this morning again with no information from the accelerometer, and everyone was very nervous. We need to get that piece of equipment back. Why is it not pinging? It should have been off for over a day now. We all continue to support Dr. Nick Whitney in waiting and watching to see what happens there. We chummed very hard in the morning and of course, we have a lot of press that want to come out to the ship now that we’ve caught a White Shark – so it’s very busy on the ship. In the meantime, I’m trying to spend most of my time on the Contender fishing with the boys and staying focused on the mission. Just after lunch, the Marine Mammal Surveyors who follow the Northern Right Whales went up on a flight and offered to fly above our ship to alert us if there were any sharks in the area. Low and behold, there was a shark 200 yards off the ship, inshore closer to the beach, and we were unaware of it. Once the plane put us on the fish, we were able to see it and get a good look at it – it was about a 15.5 ft., definitely mature, Great White Shark.

Great White Shark spot that I think people can leverage and use to study in the future. In the afternoon, the wind came up very strong. It’s going to blow up to 40 knots this evening coming up from the south with a big swell coming. We will be pushed off the spot, forcing us parked back up in Jacksonville on a weather hold. We are hoping we get to see another day of work on the water before the end of the expedition on Sunday March 10th. At the end of the day, we did get a ping! It came at the very last minute – about 3pm. Fortunately, Dr. Nick Whitney was able to get on a volunteer boat – a 30 ft. Contender and rage 40 miles off the beach in very bad weather in search of the device. After days of waiting, he recovered the accelerometer. So, we recovered that piece of equipment...a couple days late, but nonetheless we got it. We now understand that Lydia swam off shore over the first 2 days after we tagged her to about 30/40 miles off the beach in some wrecks. She recovered in about 2 hours, and was swimming very strong like a normal White Shark by the time the tag popped off. We were all thrilled to get that piece of information and know that we will be hearing from Lydia pinging in – in the future.
Mar 6, 7, 8, 2013

We got pushed off the water Tuesday afternoon by foul weather at the mouth of the St. John's River, after having seen another mature Great White Shark that day. Since then, we have kind of moved into the land expedition mode. The wind and the swell are too big for us to operate the lift; the conditions would not be safe. We have gone into land mode. We've been visiting schools and we've had schools visit the ship. Our projects now seem to have a land operation element and an ocean operation element. We are doing the field-based stuff but when we get weather days, we have these opportunities to inspire kids at the schools and invite them to come down and see the ship; trying to be really inclusive with the community. We went and visited Bishop John Snyder High School with Joseph Wiss High School kids...they were good kids. It was our first time in Jacksonville being able to get together with them. Then, we went to the University of North Florida to visit one of our Science Team's classroom – Professor Jimmy G. His classroom was great; it was a lot of fun.

On March 7th, we went down to Greenland Pines Elementary School, which was really great – 3rd graders, so much fun, they were way into it. They had been following Mary Lee and Lydia and were really prepared for us when we got there. Their Teacher Christina Ford was way cool. Then we had the St. John's River State College visit the ship with Karen Myer. It was great to have the students down here, split them up, and give them tours so they can really see where it all happens. Really watching the ship develop as a symbol of exploring and research with these young kids – it's important to actually get them on the vessel.

On March 8th, we did a Skype session with Ocean Palms Elementary School, and she is bringing the kids down to visit the ship after the Skype session. She was really great - very forward thinking. There's a lot of shark activity in her classroom, with the Shark Tracker up, shortcuts, sharks on the wall, maps following the sharks...she is really leveraging the dynamic nature of the tracker to educate her students about the ocean - you can really see the teachers that get it. Then, we visited Ponte Vedra High School with Elena Duduk. Elena was a great story from the early part of the expedition - I was just looking online and checking our OCEARCH Facebook page – I was just going through and randomly talking to people, found Elena and told her to touch base with us and that we would try and schedule something if we had to come in on a weather day. Elena jumped at the opportunity. We actually showed up in her classroom yesterday, and she was so excited to have us and we were thrilled to be there. It turned out that the Ponte Vedra High School were the Sharks so it was perfect for us to be there.
Mar 10, 2013

Expedition Jacksonville ended today. We brought the Explorer's Club flag down at approximately midday today. We celebrated one of the most historic and successful expeditions we have ever had. Capturing and releasing Lydia was a modern day discovery, and you don't see that everyday in exploration. Igniting an entire community to start to learn about their sharks and support research and the sustainable future for our sharks has been an enormous success. The reason for the success I think was because we had somewhat of a land expedition. We were able to get out there and visit multiple schools along with having multiple schools come and visit us on the ship. We were tied up in a very public place where we could engage with pedestrians. So, our 16th expedition comes to an end. It seems like the beginning of a new era – an era of funded exploration, where the purity of the mission is always our primary focus, but now we are also able to focus on engaging the community, which provides everyone in the world the opportunity to come and explore with us.