



# FILMING SHIVER

—> Aaron Gekoski

**AS I SAT ON** the giant guitarfish's face and its cavernous eyes blinked at me disbelievingly, I pondered how I'd come to be in this situation. But first I had to stop myself from throwing up. It didn't work, the stench was overpowering. Blood and shark entrails sloshed menacingly around the tiny rowing boat which I was curled up in the bottom of, trying desperately to get out of underwater cameraman Chris Scarffe's shot. A large bull shark was rapidly decomposing next to me. I had to peel eels, which were being used as bait, off my camera lens. The guitarfish looked at me as if it wished it possessed the capacity to scream, then took its final breaths. As I absorbed the absurdity of the situation, I realised why I was there: soon there may not be many of these magnificent creatures left in our oceans.

I was in Mozambique working as a cameraman on *Shiver* (which is the collective noun for sharks), a film on Africa's shark finning crisis. Back in 2009, I had a chance meeting with Dave Charley, owner of Sangué Bom - Mozambique's first company to specialize in underwater filming. Dave, who had been working and living in the country for the past seven years, had recently been invited to film in a remote shark fishing community. Here he was told were some worrying developments: for the first time in their history, these fishermen had begun targeting sharks for their fins.

It turned out that this was becoming a familiar story up and down this beautiful 3000-kilometre stretch of coastline. During recent years, Chinese middlemen had started supplying Mozambique's fishermen with the means with which to target sharks. The fishermen are rewarded handsomely for their efforts. It's hard to blame them for catching sharks: one kilogram of giant guitarfish fins equates to two months wages working in a local lodge.

## From Pitch to Production

Dave's preliminary footage was turned into a pitch to shoot a 52-minute documentary. WWF, recognising the gravity of the situation, jumped at the chance to fund it. Dave teamed up with renowned underwater camera-man and owner of Moz Images, Chris Scarffe. It was their plan to film a documentary that would head deep into the heart of Africa's shark finning industry; from the remote shark camps of rural Mozambique, to the mass industrial vessels of the high seas.

Filming *Shiver* in a country like Mozambique was always going to be a challenge. Just 20 years ago Mozambique was officially the poorest nation in the world, ravaged by a brutal civil war that tore it to pieces. Although it is slowly recovering, it remains a work in progress. Mozambique still has very little infrastructure to speak of, with the majority of the population living much as they did thousands of years ago. The country only possesses one major highway, and outside of the capital Maputo many areas have limited access to fresh water and electricity. This reality has a way of impacting documentary work in ways that are sometimes unpredictable.

Almost everything here is imported from neighbouring South Africa. Chris once told me a story of how he traveled to South Africa on a local bus for 24 hours to collect his new computer. The next day he traveled back to Mozambique, got home and plugged it in, only for a power surge to cause the computer to blow up. The very next morning he repeated the trip. It took him a total of five days before he was able to use his new computer.

In an industry so reliant on technology, such disconnection from 'civilisation' makes it imperative that gear is serviced and cleaned relentlessly. If we are on location and a piece of equipment fails, it can jeopardise the whole production. This particularly applies to underwater housings. One tiny nick to the o-ring, or a single rogue hair and your \$10,000 camera is garbage fodder. This is a subject that makes Chris sweat profusely, having once ascended rather rapidly to the surface when he noticed a leak during a descent. With the nearest chamber located in Durban, South Africa, a 20-hour drive away, risking the bends was the last thing we wanted, but protecting the camera was critical as well.



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However, on one of our trips it wasn't a flooded housing that nearly killed a member of crew, but a simple bee.

## Bee in Your Bonnet

However, on one of our trips it wasn't a flooded housing that nearly killed a member of crew, but a simple bee. Before traveling to a particularly remote finning camp, our underwater photographer CJ warned us that he had an extreme allergy to bees and could die if one stung him. CJ handed us a box of antihistamines and needle to shoot him with adrenaline should anything go wrong. We weren't too worried since we'd never heard of anyone being stung by a bee here. We turned our attention to the tasks at hand, excited at the prospect of getting unique footage.

Sure enough, deep in the Mozambican bush, miles from civilization and CJ gets stung. His face started to swell and he broke out in a vicious rash all over his body. He began to sweat profusely, as did we – even if we could get to a hospital in time, they'd be woefully ill-equipped to deal with the problem. Thankfully the antihistamines finally kicked in, his face deflated and he returned to his normal colour. But it was a nervous moment for all concerned and reminder of the need to be vigilant when filming in third world countries.

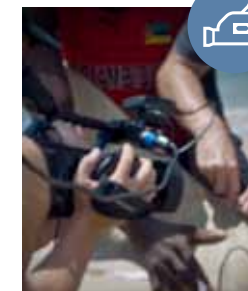
## Taking a Toll

Along with equipment malfunctions and rabid bees, our crew was constantly battling the conditions – the sun, sea air and sand, which relentlessly batter even the hardiest equipment and souls. We filmed *Shiver* during January and February, the two hottest months in Mozambique when temperatures frequently break the 40-degree barrier and humidity hits a sapping 90 percent. Some mornings we would wake at three in the morning to film the fishermen launching their boats and we wouldn't finish filming until late into the night. Physically, the work was exhausting. Emotionally, it took its toll too.

Filming in the shark camps left us with complex and conflicted feelings. Each morning we would join the fishermen on their simple rowing boats, as they braved

often terrible conditions to row out for kilometers to their buoy lines. If there were no sharks on the line, they were dejected. They needed the meat to eat and the money from the fins to support their families. As shark conservationists and as human beings this presented a dilemma. We felt for the fishermen. And we needed dramatic footage of sharks caught on longlines, losing their battle for survival. Yet it is heartbreaking to watch a creature you feel passionately about hauled up onto a boat a crudely hacked at with a machete.

During these moments the challenge is to try not to get emotional or angry and think rationally. The shark whose life is ebbing away in front of you has not died in vain; the footage will reach the masses and highlight the plight of the ocean's greatest predator.



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→ To see more of Chris Scarffe's work please visit [www.mozimages.com](http://www.mozimages.com)



## Changing Attitudes

Along with providing a catalyst for international action, our hope was also to see change at a local level. Some months after filming *Shiver* we were back filming in one of the shark finning camps. We asked one of the fishermen about cooking the shark meat. He said that their community, as well as neighbouring villages, had stopped eating it. The reason? We had shown them our film, which contained startling evidence that shark meat is laden with the lethal toxin methylmercury.

This small nugget made everything worth it; the months of hard work, difficult filming conditions and lack of resources. Our work was consistently hampered by baffling levels of officialdom and red tape. At numerous points we questioned the project and whether we'd be able to see it through to its completion. We are proud of the final result and what we achieved. The film has been translated into Mandarin and will soon be shown in China. We stopped local fishermen poisoning themselves by eating poisonous meat.

And then there were the moments that will always live with me, such as the dying giant guitarfish on that tiny rowing boat. It may not be the most glamorous industry in the world, but it can be the most rewarding.



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→ To watch *Shiver* please visit [www.aarongkoski.com](http://www.aarongkoski.com)

