

A P A S S I O N F O R S H A R K S

If ever a man has followed his passions it's Chris Fallows. He has made it his mission to raise awareness of endangered species, currently with his 11th Hour Collection of fine art photographs honouring Africa's most iconic animals.

[Words Carrie Hampton Photos chrisfallows.com](http://chrisfallows.com)



Chris is as happy in the bush amongst Africa's big game, as he is in the ocean encircled by sharks. He's been capturing images of animals for the past 25 years and only the very best are chosen for his ultimate black and white collection, currently on show in galleries across Europe.

But it's his photographs of great white sharks leaping through the air with jaws clamped over a seal, that shot Chris to fame in 1996. Never before caught on camera, these dramatic visuals captured the imagination of millions of viewers in hundreds of international magazines and over 70 documentaries he's done with National Geographic, BBC and the Discovery Channel.

This marine behaviour has been going on for 50 million years, but great white shark cage diving as a tourism opportunity in Cape Town's False Bay came only after Chris' shark pictures went global and he started Apex Shark Expeditions. Shark cage diving quickly became one of the most sought-after ocean adventures in the world, with False Bay and Gansbaai about 170km east, the epicentres. But both these huge bays are now completely devoid of this predator. Where have they gone and why?

Chris regularly gives talks about sharks as a guest speaker on luxury cruise ships, conferences, schools and public appearances. In one of his supremely illustrated presentations he poses the question, which is the greatest hunter – orcas or great whites? It turns out that they both have 50% hunting success rate, but the difference is the orcas are smarter and work together. The great whites have the same success working alone, but as Chris points out, their low numbers and poor genetic diversity in South Africa, makes them vulnerable and slow to respond to changes. This is ultimately their downfall.

He believes the great whites were taken by surprise when attacked in particular by two Orcas nicknamed Port and Starboard, for having a dorsal fin each tilting to the opposite side. Hunting together and exhausting the great whites, who are sprinters not able to maintain the stamina of a long chase, the orcas sliced open the sharks and ate their nutrient-rich livers. "Orcas sometimes play with their food, it's not a quick death," says Chris. "Great whites are gentlemanly killers; they bite their prey in half and eat it in seconds."

Orcas have undoubtedly contributed to the decline, but are not the main factor to explain the absence of great whites in False Bay. Numbers had already been significantly declining a good few years before Port and Starboard made an appearance. The great whites eat more small sharks and fish than seals, and Demersal Shark Longline fishing has depleted and over-exploited their primary food sources. In addition, Chris says, "There are only a few thousand great whites left on the planet and yet the KwaZulu-Natal Sharks Board kills more great whites than any other government sanctioned programme in the world. We are









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essentially wiping out the apex predator in our ocean because of a grossly outdated way of thinking. With an average of less than one fatal shark attack a year, out of fear we have condemned a species to possible local extinction.”

Chris surmises, “I took the first and have taken the last ever photo of breaching great whites in False Bay all in the space of just 25 years. I can’t believe we killed the ecological and financial golden goose in an evolutionary blink of an eye.”

Since the great whites have left False Bay forever, his Apex Expeditions boat excursions out of Simon’s Town concentrate on the whole marine experience, with a mixture of penguins, seals, dolphins, whales and a host of sea birds making an appearance. But it’s the bronze whaler sharks and sevengill sharks which are the stars of the show now. They are more interactive than the aloof great whites and spend a lot of time around the boats.

The privilege Chris has had in seeing these super predators up close, which includes free diving with them, made him realise he had to tell the story to the world and contribute to the change he wants to see. All the funds raised from his 11th Hour Collection of limited-edition prints are used to buy land for habitat rehabilitation and to support NGOs working in wildlife conservation. “We have some famous great white breaching photos in the collection and as we don’t ever expect to see these creatures in these waters again, these photographs will tragically never be repeated.”

Chris is in search of truly spectacular images to add to the collection and is very selective as to the time and place for the shot he’s after. “I conceptualise an image before I go and focus all my energy to capture the remarkable.” Giving centre stage to each creature in its most impeccable setting is his way of recording species that may not survive. But he’s also hoping that his work can inspire people to believe it’s not too late to save and celebrate what we have.

Chris’ wife Monique – his constant travel companion, researcher and organiser behind his creative chaos – explains that they can’t buy a piece of ocean, so they are making steps for positive change on land. They have started rewilding a nature reserve in the southern Cape and with the support of neighbouring landowners are helping to conserve six critical botanical biomes. Monique points out that there are many positives and that each of us can personally do something for the environment and conservation, however small.

Chris shines a light on Africa’s greatest animals by giving them centre stage in each of his spectacular photographs. Capturing each subject in its most perfect setting is his way of recording species that may not survive, but also to inspire people to save and celebrate what we have before it’s too late.

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