



'SHARK GIRL' SAVES THE PLANET ONE FOOTPRINT AT A TIME

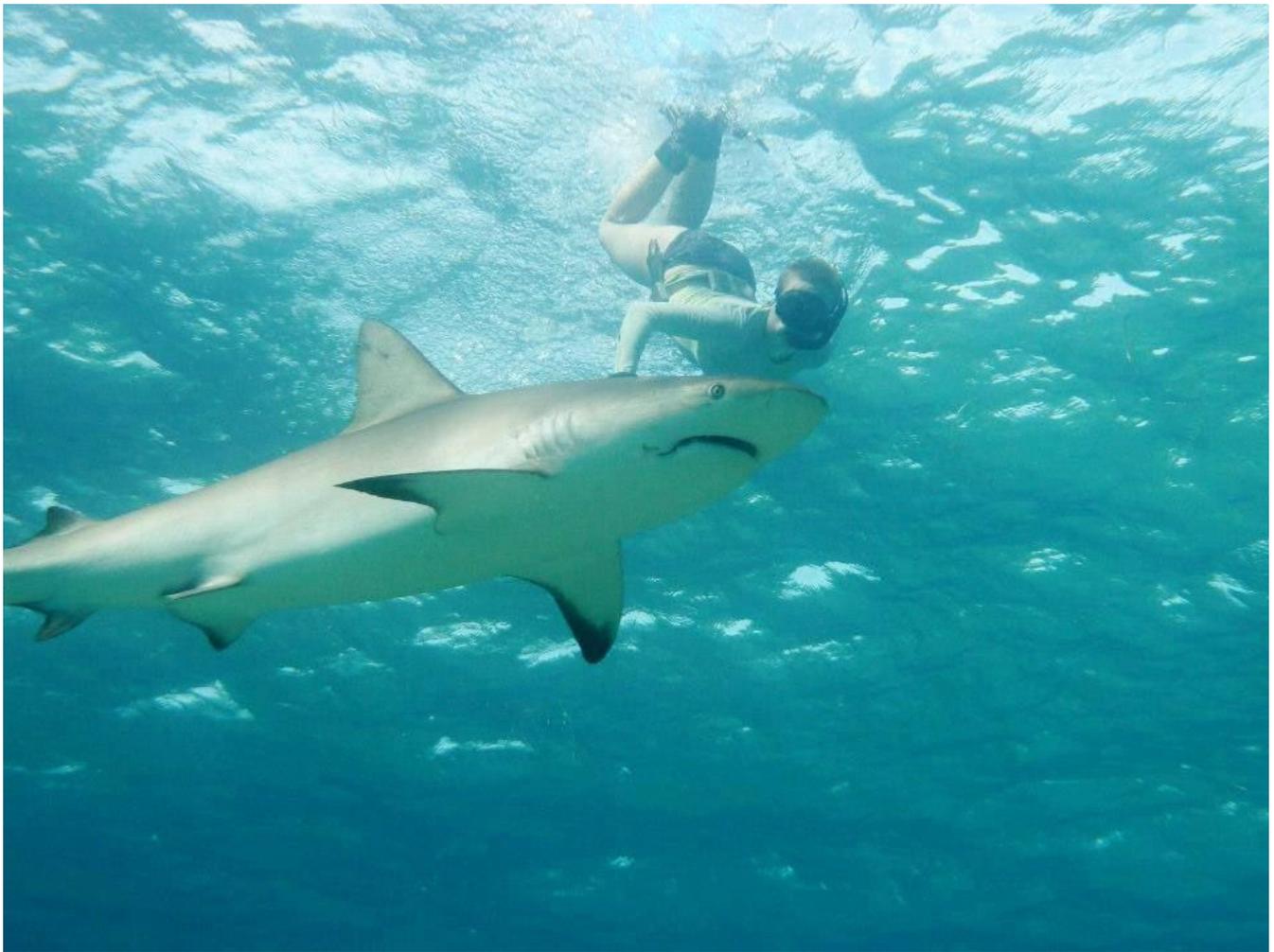
By Debbie King

Not many college juniors have swum with sharks in the Bahamas, worked in the Florida House of Representatives, and kayaked in the mountains in Banff, all in their first quarter-century.

But Hannah DeSha is no ordinary 25 years old. Inspired by the film, [Sharkwater](#), DeSha developed a fearless love for the beauty and grace of sharks while still in high school. When most students her age were traipsing around malls and prepping for prom, DeSha was engaging with others to tackle the broad perception of sharks as bloodthirsty monsters of the sea, thanks in part to sensationalistic movies such as *Jaws*." DeSha sees only graceful but misunderstood, fierce giants. "Sharks do not care for human flesh nor our presence," she explains.

Swimming with Sharks

In 2012, DeSha (known as 'Shark Girl' to her friends) realized her dream of swimming with sharks, when she joined a research team in the Bahamas to collect data and work with sharks. On her off days, she snorkeled to encounter sharks up close and personal and gained an even greater appreciation of these magnificent creatures. "I had a few sharks come towards me and just barely go over my head or pass by me but I never felt in any danger," DeSha remembers. "These animals mind their own business."



Hannah swims with a Caribbean Reef shark off the Bimini Islands in the Bahamas—Caribbean reefs inhabit the tropical Atlantic waters from Florida to Brazil.

But it was during this life-changing trip that DeSha grasped just how close humankind is to driving sharks to extinction through overfishing and shark finning—a common hunting practice that involves slicing the shark’s fins off and leaving it to die a slow death at the bottom of the ocean. And she became aware of the bigger picture as well—how the rapidly diminishing population of sharks is disrupting the ecological balance of the ocean.

If sharks go extinct, the species below them will explode in number and throw off the equilibrium of the ocean,” she explains. “It’s a bad domino effect where after those species below them explode, they eat off the fish below them until life is wiped out, coral reefs are dead, and the ocean dies.”

“And if the ocean dies we die,” DeSha stresses.



Hannah greets a Manatee at Crystal River, FL. US Manatees, also known as sea cows, reside in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. Previously classified as endangered in the 1970s their numbers have since increased to over six thousand.

Sharks are what is known as apex predators: because they reside at the top of the food chain, they maintain the ocean's delicate balance by feeding off sick and dead species below them.

But how does the reduction in shark populations impact humans? "They keep the marine populations healthy and the sick fish off of our plates," she points out. "We depend on healthy oceans and healthy oceans depend on sharks," she states. "They are vital to life on earth."

Advocating for the Environment

It was DeSha's work with sharks and ocean conservation that laid the groundwork for majoring in environmental policy. Now entering her senior year at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg, she is excited to advocate politically not only for ocean conservancy but for the environment as a whole. DeSha just completed an internship working with Florida State Representative Ben Diamond to

enact legislation banning shark finning and trading. “I’m very passionate about this political side,” she says. “I love doing outreach work, campaigning, and lobbying.”



Hannah poses with Florida State Representative Ben Diamond.

Currently, DeSha is volunteering with the Sierra Club’s political team to become their environmental outreach expert and help environmentally-friendly candidates get elected to office. She is particularly excited to participate in their campaign to convert St.Petersburg 100 percent renewable energy.

And of course, her concern for the environment naturally leads to the Pandora's box of climate change. While the main emphasis of climate change has been on weather extremes and rising sea levels, what many don't realize is how these changes are impacting humans as well. Of particular concern to DeSha is the little-talked-about issue of environmental racism, particularly in low-income coastal communities. "Low-income black and immigrant communities are disproportionately affected by climate change and yet don't receive the attention and financial resources that could make them more resilient to changes in their local environment," DeSha explains. "As a result, these areas are subjected to disproportionate exposure to pollutants, and have less access to vital necessities like clean air and water."

Changing Minds and Lifestyles

And we cannot talk about climate change without bringing up the prevailing environment of denial and even hostility inherent in the subject in the United States. DeSha is passionate about reframing the conversation about climate change to focus on personal impact and positive solutions. Once people understand how climate change is affecting them personally, they begin to change their worldview. She emphasizes that true change must begin at a personal level. "Renewable energy is a great start, but there must be an attitude and lifestyle change," she states. "We are consuming and wasting too much."

However, even climate change advocates can feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of a planet in crisis. To combat this, DeSha encourages others to make just make small changes in their lives: using recyclable bags, reducing the use of plastics, saving energy. Recently she adopted a minimalist lifestyle after watching [Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things](#), a film that explores the psychology of compulsive and conspicuous consumption. DeSha shares her journey to becoming a minimalist in her OG article, [Minimalism for the Environment](#).

Outdoor Girl

DeSha's love for the outdoors is reflected in her off-campus activities, including volunteering with conservation organizations such as Shark Savers and Shark Ops, as well as her work with the Sierra Club. And when she's not studying or volunteering, DeSha enjoys gardening, photographing nature, snorkeling and scuba diving, bicycling, and of course, swimming with marine life.



Hannah takes her Border Collie Husky, Luna, for a run on the South Florida beach.