



American Institute Of Marine Studies

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Marine magnet students to embark on shark adventure in South Africa

By BETH FEINSTEIN-BARTL
Waterfront News Writer



Photo / NEIL HAMMERSCHLAG

When Cody Ward was told that he would attend a research trip this summer to study sharks in South Africa, the 15-year-old Davie resident was shocked. "But once it sunk in, I was really excited," said Ward, a sophomore in the marine sciences magnet program at South Broward High School in Hollywood. "I love marine science and to see these animals in the wild, to see something so unique and rare, this is what I want to do for my living." Ward will join eight students and three teachers from his school on the 2004 Great White Shark Research Expedition, taking place from June 16 to 29.

The trip is sponsored by the American Institute of Marine Studies (AIMS) and will be led under the supervision of Neil Hammerschlag, a staff biologist with ReefQuest Centre for Shark Research. The South Broward High School group will work with an international team of researchers from ReefQuest led by its director, R. Aidan Martin, a world expert on sharks. They will study the biology and behavior of great white sharks at Seal Island in False Bay.

The site is frequented by possibly the largest congregation of the species in the world. Seal Island is famous for a white shark predatory behavior known as the 'breach,' when a 2500-plus pound white shark explodes from the ocean, with a seal in its mouth. Researchers call the scene an awesome display of power and acrobatic prowess. Seal Island is the only place on the planet that white sharks can be found breaching with such high frequency and ferocity.

Ted Davis, marine science magnet coordinator at South Broward High School, said the students will have no direct contact with the sharks. Instead, their job will be to assist with on-deck and land-based projects, he said. The school's magnet program has 320 students. Eight teens were selected for the expedition based on grades and previous activities, he said. "It's going to be three weeks of hard work and research," said Davis, who will be one of three teachers accompanying the students to South Africa.

Davis estimates the trip's costs at about \$60,000. AIMS is picking up the entire tab. "We thought it was a once in-a-lifetime shot for these kids," said Fred Kraft, president of AIMS, a nonprofit Fort Lauderdale-based organization dedicated to marine research and education for youth and disabled people. The group has other offices in San Diego, Calif., Sebring, Fla. and Seattle, Wash. The organization raises its funds through sales of donated items such as automobiles, yachts, artwork, real estate and houses.

AIMS has been involved with South Broward High School since the magnet program was founded eight years ago. The organization has previously funded other trips taken by students and teachers, including studying killer whales in Puget Sound, Washington; a dinosaur dig in Wyoming's Big Horn Basin and 18 days on an oceanographic research vessel off the coast of Vancouver Island in British Columbia. "I feel these trips will have a serious effect on the young people's lives and futures," Kraft said.

Once the students return from South Africa they will continue to work for Hammerschlag who expects to receive his master's degree in marine biology in May from Nova Southeastern University Oceanographic Center in Fort Lauderdale. He was awarded a scholarship from AIMS to pursue a doctorate in marine biology this fall at the Pew Institute for Ocean Science at the University of Miami.

Hammerschlag believes the expedition will give students much-needed hands-on experience. "They will be seeing spectacular things." He started volunteering with South Broward High School last fall. To date, the students have been mapping shark attacks on seals in South Africa based on research from ReefQuest, he said.

Debra Hixon, assistant magnet coordinator at South Broward High School, said students have been meeting once a week after school to discuss what will be expected of them during their stay and what they will find. "When Neil offered for us to come out and collect data, we thought, 'great,' but we never expected to do it," said Hixon, who will accompany the students on the expedition.

Daniell Washington, 17, a South Broward High School senior also going to South Africa, is excited over what she'll learn about the sharks. "I want to get rid of the conception of them being a mindless eating machine. I want to get rid of the Jaws myth."

Washington, a Hollywood resident attending the University of Miami this fall, is planning a career in marine science. She hopes to continue working on projects with Hammerschlag and South Broward magnet students. "This trip will give me experience in pursuing my dream," she said.

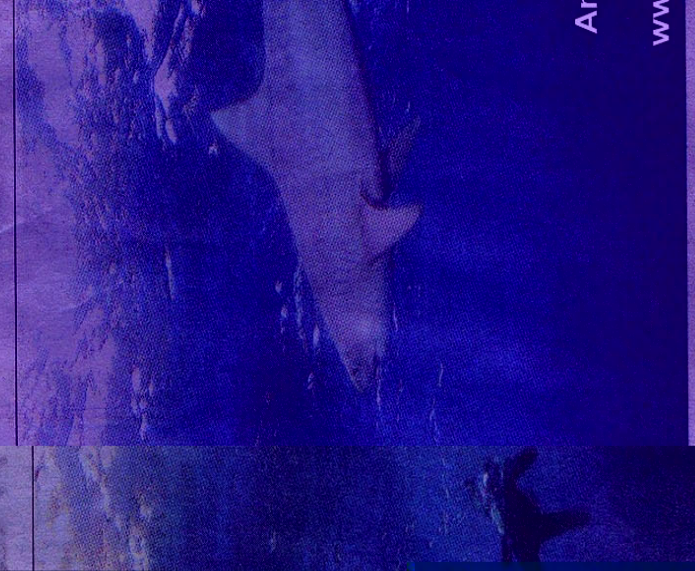
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1231 North East 8th Avenue * Fort Lauderdale, FL 33304
800.826.6840 * 954.772.8872 Fax
www.aimsamerica.org

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EXPERT: Neil Hammerschlag photographs a tiger shark, above, while on an expedition with eight other scientists. He will lead an expedition with eight other scientists to fill gaps in what science knows about sharks.

to Africa, said Fred Krupp in a recent issue of National Geographic. "He's genuine and he's got a lot of research," Krupp said. "He's got a focus on the world's oceans, and he's got a focus on the world's oceans." Hammerschlag said his goal is to educate the public about the importance of keeping sharks protected from their only predator: humans. Sharks are still hunted for their fins and other illegal byproducts. Additionally, a study conducted from 1986 to 2001 by Dalhousie University marine

researchers, who tracked accidental catches and kills of 14 shark species by tuna and swordfish fishermen in the Northwest Atlantic, indicated that shark populations were depleted during that time by more than 50 percent.

So far, Hammerschlag has studied and photographed sharks off South Africa, Mexico, Mozambique, the Bahamas and Hawaii.

"I'm a shark nut. Nothing gives me more pleasure than going anywhere in the world, jumping in the water and swimming with sharks," he said.

"The kids worked, studied and learned in classrooms," he said.

"Now they can go out into the field, take the data collected, actually see it work and do things with it that give more meaning to the educational experience."

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