Up Close and Personal with a Famous Oceanographer

Dr. Eugenie Clark
Shark Researcher

Dr. Eugenie Clark has published more than 150 articles (12 for *National Geographic*), written 3 books, been featured in 6 documentary films (including "The Sharks," a *National Geographic* special), is listed in the *Encyclopedia Brittanica,* and has had 4 fish named after her.

At what age did you first become interested in the ocean? Was there one special event that led to your decision to work as an oceanographer?
Age 9, on my first visit to an aquarium.

What do you like most about the career that you've chosen?
The fact that I can combine two things I love to do the most: diving in the sea and watching fishes and sharks.

What do you like the least about your career?
The paper work that does not concern my research or teaching. The frustration of not being able to answer all of the wonderful letters I receive, especially those from children (she receives over 1,000 letters a year).
Note: Dr. Clark would be most likely to answer letters from students who enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

If you were to give a young oceanographer one piece of advice, what would you tell him or her?
Follow your dream. You will work much harder and better at what you love to do and study most. There is a lot of hard work ahead and many courses are required (math, statistics, chemistry, physics, etc.) to become a good biologist. But it is worth it!

What skill or personal attribute helped you to attain your goal?
Writing and speaking.

What are your fears for the great oceans of the planet?
I am optimistic that the present change in attitude of younger people (and the obvious need for global conservation) will turn the tide and save the oceans. Young people understand how important this is now!

What dreams do you have for the next 20 years of your life?
I have now retired from full-time teaching and teach one course a year, leaving me more time to scuba dive and do research. I also want to "play" in my Japanese garden. There is no age limit for scuba diving. I hope to be diving when I'm 90. (Dr. Clark has been diving since 1945 and is over 70 years old.)

[Before this interview Dr. Clark traveled to the Sea of Cortez, near La Paz, Mexico, to dive with whale sharks. She wrote an article for National Geographic (Dec. 1992) on whale sharks. This trip was a continuation of her research.]

I was in the Sea of Cortez two weeks ago. We had 30 whale sharks around our boat. We also saw two gray whales, seven fin whales, two Brydes whales and about 50 manta rays. I have never seen such large numbers of plankton feeders. I could see that there was some kind of upwelling occurring. Nutrient material from the upwelling was available to the plankton, so all of these big plankton feeders were coming in to feed.

What is the secret of your vitality?
I've never smoked, I watch my cholesterol intake, and when I'm not scuba diving I try to go to the gym 3 times a week for aerobics. I love my work! I've taught over 4,000 students about life in the oceans and I've ridden 26 whale sharks (the largest was 55 feet long). Once I slipped in the bathtub and knocked myself out—my most dangerous accident. Imagine the newspaper headlines if I had died: "Shark Lady Dies in Bathtub."

Describe your work at the Red Sea.
For eight years I pushed for Egypt to protect its coastal area. I spoke to Presidents Sadat and Mubarek. In 1983, Egypt finally declared their most beautiful coral reef at Ras Mohammed a national park. It is the first time any country has made a marine park their first national park. And it is still the only national park in the Red Sea.

In the Red Sea, we are studying many types of sand fishes that live near coral reefs. As the reefs crumble, the coral falls into the sand area. The sand around the coral reefs is a good indication of the health of the coral.
A few species of fish thrive on pollution and debris. There are others who are very sensitive to changes in the environment.

Trichonotus nikii, an eel-like fish that I named after my son Niki, has gone from a population of 500,000 to less than 1,000. The change in the population is due to a pollution factor in the environment in the last few years. We believe that the main source of the pollution might be at a new Saudi Arabian port.