

PIERRE CONSTANT

# night of the bambooshark

Hooded bambooshark, "Hemiscyllium strahani", night dive, Eel Garden



**THE AMBER MOON WAS RISING BETWEEN THE TWO DARK ISLANDS LYING LOW ON THE HORIZON. IT MUST HAVE BEEN FULL MOON. EVERYTHING WAS STILL IN THE PALE BLUE LIGHT. THE BOAT WAS FOLLOWING THE MOONBEAM GLITTERING ON THE SMOOTH BLACK WATER SURFACE. ONLY THE SOUND OF THE BOW WAVE WAS PERMEATING THE PEACE. THE PERFECT NIGHT, I THOUGHT, TO SEEK THE BEAST.**

Many consider Madang to be a sleepy laid-back town on the shore of the Bismarck Sea. I'd been there a few times in the last 10 years but somehow I'd never spent enough time there to fully appreciate its underwater environment. Always passing by too quickly, I guess. I'd come once with a team of French divers in April 1998, but the sea conditions and the visibility weren't great. "You should come in July-August..." I was told.

But in the four days there, I'd greatly enjoyed the night dives on the wreck of the Henry Leith, a trawler sunk in 19 metres. At a nearby island was another famous wreck, the B-25 Mitchell bomber. One handicap though is the silt bottom which usually gives poor visibility.

The Henry Leith is literally covered with colorful soft corals, gorgonians and black coral, which - at night - turn the wreck into a fairyland. Fish are hiding in every corner. On deck are the lionfish, scorpionfish and crocodilefish, in the hulls

the balloon fish and puffers, on the sides surgeons and damselfish. Even in the pilot house, hanging cables support of zigzag oyster colonies hosting tiny coral hawkfish and sharpnose puffers, sleeping exquisitely on a bed of red encrusting sponge. The annoying thing with this night dive is that you never have enough!

Fast forward into June 1999.

Wearing a bright orange overall, ranger boots and a mariner blue cap, long time resident Tim Rowlands didn't see me coming. Absorbed in his thoughts, he looked weary after the tiring job of salvaging an anchor overnight which was lost in a nearby river. 'Hey!... Long time no see! What brings you here?'. 'Tim, if I was asking you about some good night dive in Madang, what would you suggest?' 'Eel Garden', he snapped without hesitation. 'A dive site where you can sometimes see a small shark crawling on the sandy bottom. Never seen it in any book, must be a new species...'

That was enough to pull my trigger. Sometime later, I'm cruising through darkness, riding the bow wave under the pale moonlight with Stanis, the young dive guide, a friendly bloke and surprisingly serious with his work. We don the equipment behind the island and make our way to the Bismarck Sea side, before we roll overboard. The guide swims ahead with an American couple. I stay behind with my assistant Mei Fang, taking pictures. Eel Garden was named after a white slope of sand where garden eels can be seen, among other things. We actually start on the coral reef slope to end up over the sand patch. Soon, my torchlight shines on an old catamaran, sunk, by hearsay, about 30 years ago. Stanis glides on, but I stop and explore. To my astonishment, a few soft

corals and gorgonians are on the wreck, including hard corals on the outriggers. There we find some bearded scorpionfish, a two spot lionfish (aren't they beautiful?) and waah!... three nudibranchs, Hypselodoris bullocki, pink with yellow gills, doing what? Well, lavishly mating just before our eyes. My, oh my, I've never witnessed that one, ever! The highlight is the presence of a huge Napoleon wrasse, at least 1.5 metres in length, sleeping under the main hull. This beautiful

iridescent green and blue monster shows no fear or reaction whatsoever to the strobe light. Portraits and close up of its monstrous lips are in order, then its globulous eyes start moving suspiciously. When I feel he's had enough, I leave him alone. On the sand patch, a small colony of seapens, Cavernulina sp, little feathery arms spread out across the current, host a miniature symbiotic 'galatheid' crab, Porcellana picta. A white conger eel sneaks by like a winding snake, hurrying

to get out of the way. Afraid of the light, it freezes and swiftly dives backwards into the sand, disappearing completely. I inspect the white slope for any form of shark. Nothing. We surface into the hot, humid night, greeted by the island's cicadas. Back on the speedboat, the American couple is hilarious. "Did you see that incredible small shark that was crawling on to the sand like a cat? It was using its pectoral fins to move forward! God, wasn't that amazing?". Well, sorry we

missed it. Rats! Hey, we enjoyed our dive anyway. That huge Napoleon wrasse (giant Maori wrasse for the Aussies) made our night OK. "It was so cute...", marvels Mei Fang "and so big!"

The following day, Stanis doesn't show up. Richard, another guide, is reluctant to go diving at all. Eventually, he accepts the night dive. Same time, same place. This time by the catamaran, we spot a large stingray that scares rapidly. On the sand

# ON BAMBOOSHARKS

There are at least six recognized species of bamboosharks which belong to the genus *Hemiscyllium* found in the Indo-Pacific region of northern Australia to Papua New Guinea and stretching towards Indonesia. These are *H. freycineti*, *H. hallstromi*, *H. ocellatum*, *H. strahani*, *H. trispeculare* and *Hemiscyllium* sp. The most common ones are the epaulette shark *H. ocellatum* and the speckled carpet shark *H. trispeculare*.

The epaulette shark, *Hemiscyllium ocellatum*, is a small slender shark with a black ocellus with white margin above each pectoral fin. Two short barbels are found under the tip of snout. Besides that, it has dark spots widely spaced all over the body, colour cream, yellowish to brown. Common in shallow water on coral reefs, it is oviparous and feeds mainly on benthic invertebrates. Eggs are elliptical in shape, about 10cm long, 4cm wide and take 130 days to hatch. Juveniles have several darker brown saddles on the back and tail. It reaches a size of 107cm. Its distribution is from New Guinea to northern Australia, although there are some records from Malaysia and Sumatra.

The speckled carpet shark, *Hemiscyllium trispeculare*, also known as marbled catshark is equally small, slender, with a black ocellus bordered in white above each pectoral fin. Two other 'eye' spots are found on the shoulder, on both sides of the body. Two dorsal fins equal in size. Colourwise, the dorsal surface and fins are yellowish, covered with a dense mosaic of fine brownish spots. Brownish bands are also conspicuous on the body and tail. Oviparous, feeding on benthic invertebrates, it reaches a size of at least 65cm. Its distribution is to northern Australia and possibly around Maluku in Indonesia



patch are some lovely blue spotted stingray. Unfortunately, Richard is stung on the hand by another stingray. I will never know how he did it, but he doesn't turn up the next morning. He was taken to the hospital in a hurry, suffering gradually unbearable pain and was given an injection right away. Still no catshark. I'm now pretty jealous of this American couple who met the little monster.

Excellent day dives at Magic Passage and Planet Rock make me forget my frustration, but in the evening the itch comes back. Bored with the idea of a repetitive dive at the same spot. Mei Fang, my official assistant and U/W model does not join me. Lammiu, the new dive guide, accepts to take me, all smiles. Believe it or not, he manages to spot the devil on a coral mound, resembling a giant cauliflower with holes everywhere. The

Lammiu discovers his pressure gauge is leaking. No way can he dive. Without any choice, I go diving alone.

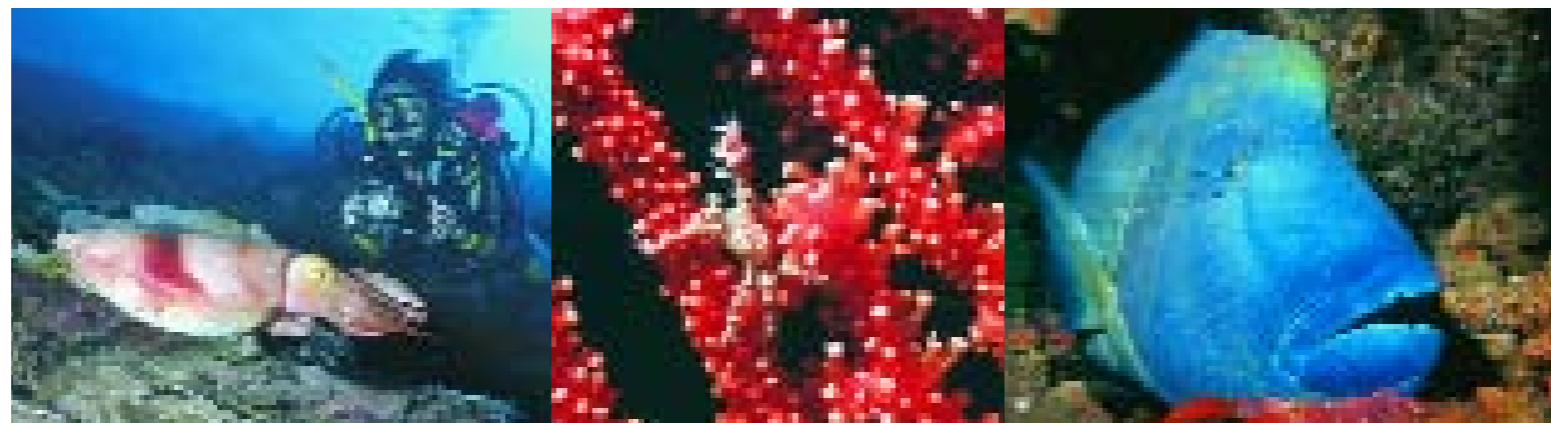
I find my way over the white sand patch, and head straight towards the catamaran, trying to remember where Lammiu saw the little fellow the night before. At once, I am over the cauliflower-like mound of coral, *Stylophora pistillatus* (excuse-me!) and 'bingo!'... Here it is, under my eyes, in less than three minutes. The excitement is overwhelming, but I managed to calm down, directing the light away from the shark's eyes. The creature looks like a sausage with a broad head and truncated nose. The caudal fin is conspicuously long. The body is orange brown with white streaks the entire length. A distinctive dark blotch circled in white lies behind the gill slits. All fins are delicately white rimmed.

A rather similar looking 'speckled catshark'

Each time a different photograph, a metre away at first, then close-ups of the head, only 30 cm away.

Later I surprised a big reef crab, *Carpilius maculatus*, white with red spots, walking over a colony of soft corals, *Sarcophyton* sp., looking like rubbery mushrooms. Finally, a friendly cuttlefish meets me on the top of the sandy slope, giving me an OK signal with an erected tentacle. I was in heaven! What else could I possibly ask for? Back on the boat, I put on the miserable face they were used to. "I did not even see one shark...", I groaned. They all turn their head away. "... I saw five of them!" and happily show them five fingers with my hand up. They all beamed with excitement. Mission accomplished at last!

Home again I had a close look at my slides, with all specialized books spread out open on the carpet. My bambooshark was



little fellow, about 80 centimetres long, was simply dozing or maybe basking in the moonlight, possibly on watch. I'm all excited. With the close up lens on the camera, I'll be lucky to get close enough for a photograph. By the time I remove the outfit to shoot with the 35mm lens only, it's too late. The snake-like phenomenon has vanished into the first crack. I feel desperate. On board, Lammiu smiles on hearing what happened. "Do not worry my friend, we will go again tomorrow!"

I'm determined not to give up. The dive center is now used to seeing me every evening so Lammiu is expecting me on a fourth consecutive night. Again, the boat sails through the night silently to the island. Geared up and his tank ready,

described in Gerry Allen's book *Reef fishes of Papua New Guinea - Hemiscyllium trispeculare*, is cream colour with black spots, inhabits shallow coral reefs and usually seen resting on the bottom. Feeds on small fishes and invertebrates. Distinguished by pale edged black spot just behind gill slits. Found from north Australia to New Guinea. Harmless, with maximum size of 65cm. It belongs to the *Hemiscyllidae* family or bamboosharks.

But this is not the one. The shark disappears between the knobs of coral, after the second fire of my strobe. This is a perfect hiding place for this shy predator. The whole coral mound must be a bambooshark city! The next 15 minutes prove it - I discover a second, a third, a fourth and even a fifth.

definitely different in colour and pattern from the one described and illustrated in Gerry Allen's book and others. I almost believed I'd discovered a new species! Only the dark blotch behind the gills, compares my species to the members of *Hemiscyllidae*. This family, known as bamboosharks (not catsharks) is made of small, slender sharks, characterized by the occurrence of nasoral and perinasal grooves, dorsolateral eyes, nasal barbels and a small mouth. Eleven species are found in the family, distributed in the tropical western Pacific. The two genera of *Chiloscyllium* and *Hemiscyllium* are restricted to north Australia and New Guinea, commonly encountered in the intertidal zone, inshore rocks and coral

Top left to right:

- Cuttlefish, night dive, Eel Garden • Dark spotted moray *Gymnothorax fimbriatus*, night dive, Eel garden • Red spotted grouper, Eel Garden

Below left to right:

- Red spotted grouper, Eel Garden • Arrowhead crab on gorgonian, Henry Leith
- Giant Napoleon wrasse, night dive, Eel garden • Mei Fang with giant gorgonian, Pig Point
- Basketstar feeding, Eel Garden night dive





reefs. Some are oviparous and lay oval egg cases on the bottom. All are generally under 100cm in length.

To make a long story short, I paid a visit to Bernard Seret, the shark specialist at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. He raised an eyebrow, then leafed through respectable books. An old scientific publication described a very rare species, looking strangely similar to the one I had seen. The hooded catshark, *Hemiscyllium strahani*, restricted to the vicinity of Port Moresby circa 1960, found in Taronga Zoo Park Aquarium in Sydney in 1967. A second specimen had been collected from Massas Island off the southern tip of Papua New Guinea in 1978. Then, no records for more than 20 years! Amazing. The diagnosis mentioned dark bands and spots on the ventral surface of the throat, light spots on a dark body background. Eventually that was the one. "Well, to be absolutely sure, you should bring a specimen back, next time you dive over there..." said Mr Seret, with a smile, "best would be to bring a couple!"

"And how do you expect me to do that?..." I replied with a frown.

**Left to right:**

**Children in Madang • Seapen crab, *Henry Leith***

**• The swimming pool at Jais Aben Resort, Madang**



French photojournalist Pierre Constant was once a resident of Papua New Guinea, running a dive centre in Manus. He currently organizes expeditions and dive trips to PNG. Pierre is also the author of *Manus, Admiralty Islands- Lost world of the Titans*, a coffee table book of underwater photographs from the region.

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