

[DREAM JOB]

Filming a lemon shark at Tiger Beach, Bahamas



Age: 28
Sopping Ground: Miami, Florida, and the Bahamas
Job: Executive Director of Oceanic Allstars, professional Shark Diver, underwater photographer

Meet Jillian Morris

Thanks to movies like Jaws, most people dread the thought of a shark encounter. Jillian Morris can think of no better way to spend the day. She's turned a love of the ocean and a fascination with sharks into a career in marine biology, education, and conservation. She took a moment from her daily blend of science, outreach, and diving to tell us more.

What sparked your interest in diving? In sharks?

I grew up on a lake in Maine so I've always been in the water—I swam before I walked. I don't remember ever not loving the water and the ocean; it was always a part of me, so diving was a natural progression. I got certified [in SCUBA] in college while pursuing a degree in behavioral biology with a marine focus. My first internship was with Mote Marine Laboratory in Florida doing shark research—diving with them, tagging them, researching them. I got to handle them and see them up close. I knew right away I wanted to work with them long-term. There are so many stereotypes about sharks, and none of them are true. They are not man-eaters, for example. Most shark attacks are cases of mistaken identity. To see them swim and move, and if you get to make eye contact with one, it's beautiful. My favorite place to be in the world is in the water with them.

What's a typical day on the job like for you?

On a shark dive day, the first challenge is to get them to come around. It's a lot harder than people think. We use a baiting technique to put a scent into the water and lure them in. It's funny because sharks are pretty particular, so we have to use different types of dead fish for different sharks. If we're using a cage

for the divers, we get that set up, and we prep them on how to keep themselves safe, and how to keep the animals safe. Once I've got everyone in the water, then it's about trying to keep the sharks interested. They're not used to being around people with scuba tanks blowing bubbles, so they are cautious about sticking around. But once they settle in, it's like you're in your own personal aquarium.

What inspires you about your work?

Just knowing how important sharks are to the ocean. They are at the top of the food chain, so to lose them has devastating effects. Without sharks, the ocean would die. It means something to me, personally and in the greater scheme of ocean preservation, to do my part to expose people to sharks, to educate people, to create video footage and photos of sharks that reach far beyond Florida.

What is the most surprising thing for you about your career?

Every day is completely different. As much as you think you know how a day is going to unfold, working with animals, there is always something unanticipated. That adrenaline, that charge, that energy, really keeps you motivated. Even if you're getting up at 4:00 a.m. to head out for an early dive, you have such an energy charge that you don't need coffee.

“Some of my earliest memories are of being dragged out of the water by my mom because I was turning blue.”



DUNCAN BRAKE