Embarrassed Emperor pledges good works

A MAJOR RED SEA DIVE CHARTER operator has promised to set a good example over conservation issues after being named, and shamed by the respected regional conservation body it helped found.

Emperor Divers was named as February’s “Violator of the Month” by the Hurghada Environmental Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA). The “award” was created as part of the Red Sea Weeks Campaign, launched by HEPCA at the Dive 2007 Show at the NEC last October.

One of the first conservation projects carried out under the Red Sea Weeks Campaign has been the installation of a mooring system around the popular Thistlegorm wreck, to reduce wear and tear on the wreck’s structure.

Emperor’s transgressions, as noted on submitted reports, included disregard for the mooring system and other regulations governing visits to the wreck, boats anchoring and littering within National Park boundaries’. HEPCA declared the choice of Emperor vessels, and subsequently thanked “staff, captains and crew of the Emperor Fleet for their many beneficial suggestions offered”. It said all the captains had agreed to join the HEPCA Volunteer Red Sea Ranger Initiative, under which dive industry operators nominate one or more individuals to note and report environmental violations.

So what went adrift with the Thistlegorm project?

HEPCA HAS EXPLAINED WHY a system of surface-buoyed diver descent and ascent lines has not been installed over the Thistlegorm wreck, as originally planned, to supplement the boat moorings laid around the ship.

“About 80% of the boats going to the wreck are day-boats out of Sharm El Sheiks,” Amir Ali, Managing Director of HEPCA, told DIVER. “The problem is that, for security reasons, they are not allowed to carry Zodicas or other tenders, and these would be required for ferrying divers between charter boats and the diving lines.”

“Also there was also an issue regarding the provision of decompression reg, if not owned by the divers – no more than four per person.”

“Access to the wreck, therefore, since the lines are down the mooring lines to which the divers’ vessel is attached, followed by a seaward swim of some 500m across the wreck. But even the mooring lines have hit problems. They rise just 9m off the seabed, held aloft by small buoys. Diver based systems of lights and small divers to attack the line bodies. But within months of the mooring system’s introduction, half of the 32 mooring lines that surround the wreck have been severed – by nothing more mischievous than the local fish.

“Tiger shark feeds involving bull and tiger sharks do, however, take place in other parts of the world. Bull shark dives were banned altogether in Florida in 2001, concerns ranging from diving risks to perceived effects on shark behaviour which, it is thought, could increase risk to other water-users off popular beaches. But shark-feed dives remain legal in the nearby Bahamas. They are carried out mainly with such species as nurse, blacktip and Caribbean reef sharks.

As DIVER went to press, Abernethy had not responded to a request for information. But he told US media: “I would never have done any of this if I thought there would have been an accident.”

Fatal shark attacks worldwide fell to their lowest level for 20 years in 2007, according to the International Shark Attack File. Only one death was recorded, the lowest figure since 1987, when there were no fatalities. But the number of shark attacks rose slightly over the previous year, with 71 in 2007 compared with 63 in 2006.

Twelve attacks were recorded in Australia, the remaining nine split among South Africa, New Caledonia, Fiji, Ecuador, Mexico and New Zealand.

DIVER loses life during Bahamas shark-feed

T HE PROFESSIONAL SHARK CHARITY diving industry has suffered what is thought to be its first fatality. Markus Groh, 49, from Austria, died after being bitten during a baited shark dive in the Bahamas. The lawyer from Vienna, described as an avid diver, was on a six-day trip with other Austrians aboard the dive-boat Sheer Water, run by Rogerio Beach, Florida by Abernethy’s Scuba Adventures, which specialises in shark-diving excursions. It had been marketed as a trip seeking out tiger and hammerhead sharks.

“The final hours ended off Great Isaac Cay, the divers making an open water dive to encounter sharks drawn in by fish bait. According to some reports, it was a bull shark that attacked Groh, biting him on a leg, perhaps because of a piece of bait getting very close to his body. It was also reported that the fatal injury may have been a pulmonary embolism caused by a rapid ascent, rather than the bite itself.

A Mayday call was put out and Groh, in a critical condition, was evacuated by helicopter to Miami’s Jackson Memorial Hospital, where he died shortly afterwards.

As DIVER went to press, it had yet to emerge whether the group was diving at a site providing some natural cover on the seabed, or was relatively exposed. According to the Bahamas Diving Association, operator Jim Abernethy had “pushed the envelope” in running cageless bait dives with the more aggressive and large shark species such as bull and tigers.

“You personally pleased with Jimmy to step this action, but he refused to comply with good judgment,” Neal Watson, President of the Bahamas Diving Association, told The Miami Herald. “He would not use a cage, and this is the result.”

Cageless shark feeds involving bull and tiger sharks do, however, take place in other parts of the world. Bull shark dives were banned altogether in Florida in 2001, concerns ranging from diving risks to perceived effects on shark behaviour which, it is thought, could increase risk to other water-users off popular beaches. But shark-feed dives remain legal in the nearby Bahamas. They are carried out mainly with such species as nurse, blacktip and Caribbean reef sharks.

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