

MARK CARWARDINE



On the wild thoughts that won't let him sleep. This month:

Why free-diving is a threat

There is a ridiculous craze sweeping the diving fraternity: free-diving with great white sharks. Self-styled 'shark whisperers', and relatively inexperienced novices on adventure holidays, are swimming alongside great whites, touching them and even riding them in grand displays of derring-do.

Some do it for the adrenalin rush, and some to show off, while others believe that they're helping the sharks by demonstrating their 'gentle disposition'. I think it's an accident waiting to happen – and it has to stop.

Don't get me wrong. I've spent hundreds of hours cage-diving with great white sharks in South Africa and Mexico, and I'm one of their biggest fans. I'm the first to argue that they are nothing like the ruthless, mindless monsters portrayed in *Jaws*.

I'm even an advocate of responsible, educational shark diving. Done properly, it can directly benefit the sharks by providing a much better alternative to hunting (making the animals worth more alive than dead) and by lighting an internal fire that makes people determined to do something to help these much-maligned creatures.

But there's no denying that large sharks, such as bulls, tigers and great whites, can be unpredictable and

dangerous. Even top experts, who can read the warning signs and understand the kind of human behaviour that makes sharks forget their manners, have suffered the consequences.

These free-divers have – so far – got away with their great white antics. I accept that, if they want to risk their own lives, that's up to them. But what worries me is that if there is an accident, it will have serious repercussions for the sharks. It might result



Cage-diving is the best way to see great whites.

“*Responsible shark diving can benefit the sharks, making them worth more alive than dead.*”

in a ban on all shark diving in the area – removing the eyes and ears that keep poachers at bay. Worse still, the sharks will get the blame – inevitably and undeservedly – and that will undermine worldwide efforts to protect them.

It's just a matter of time.

Mark Carwardine is a zoologist, photographer, writer, conservationist and BBC TV presenter.