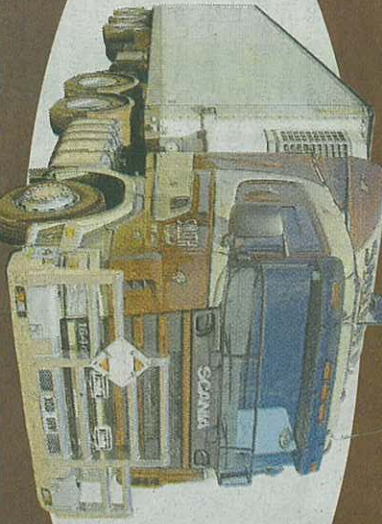


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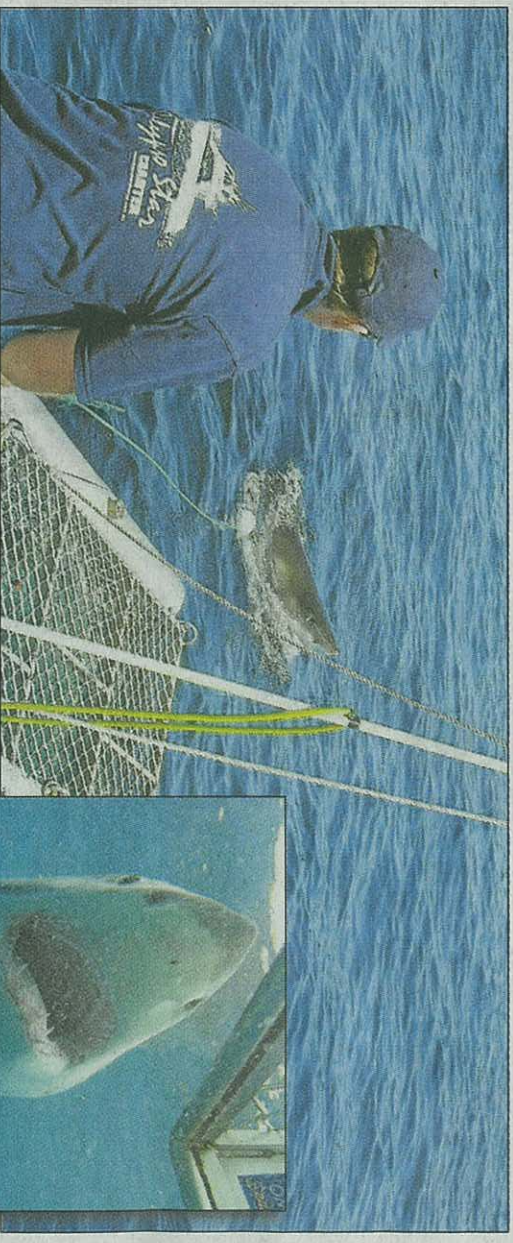
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UP CLOSE: Calypso Star Charters general manager Andrew Wright never imagined he would end up involved with shark diving at Port Lincoln. On the tours, visitors come face-to-face with 'monsters of the deep' (inset) from the safety of a mesh dive-cage.

A 'safe' place to dive with sharks

By **LOUISE McBRIDE**

PORT Lincoln's unique dive charters include swimming with tuna and sea lions but the ultimate experience is jumping in the water alongside the ocean's greatest and most fierce predators - Great White sharks.

Shark-diving tour boat Calypso Star manager Andrew Wright said coming face-to-face with a Great White shark in the water through the safety of a cage was an exhilarating experience.

It is the Western Australian export's ninth year onboard Calypso Star, a company which started in 1990.

His stint in Port Lincoln started as a four-month holiday to get his charter hours up, but he now calls EP's regional hub home.

"It is a nice town with beautiful scenery," he said. "There are lots of opportunities here for young people. It is not like we are at the ends of the earth over here, but far enough from the hustle and bustle."

Mr Wright bought into the company six years ago and it has since expanded to employ 10 staff. The company started one-day tours about five years ago and they have proven to be its most successful product. They also offer three-day tours by request.

"Not in my wildest dreams did I ever think that I would end up involved in shark diving," he said.

"I thought I would get my sea-time up working in the prawn or tuna industries. I had never even seen a shark before. But now I would not have it any other way."

Key points

- Great White shark diving popular at Port Lincoln
- One-day tours most popular with tourists
- No population expansion since protected species status given

"The Calypso Star operates near the Neptune Islands, south west of Port Lincoln, the breeding ground for about 4000 fur seals. Sharks are attracted to the boat using fish offal. Visitors spend about 45 minutes underwater in a mesh cage, where they can come face-to-face with huge Great Whites. Tours operate all year round and winter months are peak times for shark-spotting.

"The cold water does not deter people. The suspense in the cage is unreal. It is what keeps you going."

Port Lincoln visitor Juliet Cameron, Adelaide, went on a Calypso Star shark tour last month and was blown away by the 'heart-stopping' experience.

"It was so exhilarating," she said. "I had no idea that Great White sharks were so easy to see. Every Australian should do it."

Shark diving off Eyre Peninsula's coastline started in the 1960s.

There has been increased focus on Great Whites recently following the tragic death of Port Lincoln abalone diver Peter Clarkson, who was taken by two Great White sharks as he surfaced from a dive in February. In the past 26 years, 11 people have been killed by sharks in South Australian waters. Increased sightings of Great White

sharks have renewed some calls for a cull amid claims that numbers have increased too much since the shark became a protected species in 1998.

Mr Wright said he did not agree that the Great White population had exploded in the past decade but rather that the news of sightings had increased.

"I think society is just better at letting everyone know that they have seen a shark. It used to be if you saw a shark, you would tell your mates. Now with new social networking technologies such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, phone cameras, videos, and online news, we can spread the word of shark sightings more quickly and further afield.

"The likelihood of ever lifting their protection status is nil."

Mr Wright said the company works with CSIRO on shark research and patterns.

"We see a lot of the same sharks. They are easy to pick out with distinctive characteristics and markings."

Some sharks are tagged in Port Lincoln and are found to clock up the miles quickly and are recorded soon after in places like Western Australia and Queensland, even New Zealand.

"If a shark is seen near Perth, chances are that it has also been here as well. One shark was recorded at Ningaloo reef near Exmouth in Western Australia and had swum the 3500 kilometres in six weeks from Port Lincoln."

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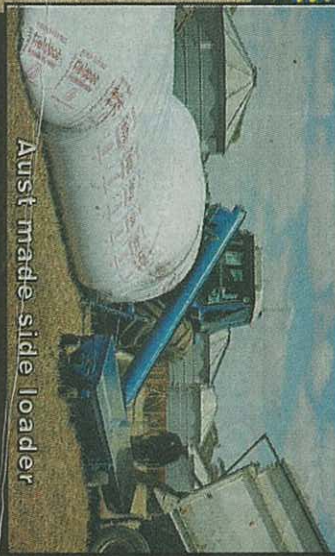


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