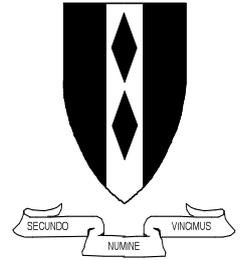




## BRITISH ARMY NEWS

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### **MILITARY PERSONNEL TAG A TOTAL OF 50 SHARKS ACROSS THE EASTERN PACIFIC**

The Joint Services Shark Tagging Team (JSSTT) comprising fifteen military personnel representing the Army, Navy and RAF has just returned from an ambitious diving expedition to tag critically endangered sharks around Cocos Island, 535km off the Pacific coast of Costa Rica. The expedition tagged 15 sharks, bringing the total number of sharks tagged by the team as a whole to 50.

The Cocos Island National Park is a UNESCO World Heritage site and the work is of international environmental importance value, underlining the value placed on the quality of military training and of the experience of personnel. The Armed Forces are dedicated to both adventurous training as a developmental activity and to stewardship of the environment. The research work carried out by the expedition took place in co-operation with Programa Restauracion de Tortugas Marinas (PRETOMA – a Costa Rican NGO specialising in shark and turtle conservation. The expedition took place from 22 June – 06 July 2010.

The JSSTT exists to provide manpower and resources for shark tagging and other marine conservation projects where diving skills are required, acting as “*a force for good in marine conservation.*” JSSTT expeditions operate under the Joint Services Adventurous Training scheme and are nicknamed EXERCISE JURASSIC SHARK. They are open to military and essential scientific personnel only and act as representatives for PRETOMA in the UK.

Including this latest expedition, the JSSTT has now tagged 50 sharks and placed 6 acoustic receivers in the Eastern Pacific with the aim of building an overall picture of shark movements in the across the Eastern Pacific Tropical Seascape and beyond. The first expedition, EXERCISE JURASSIC SHARK, tagged 15 hammerhead sharks off Cocos Island, Costa Rica in July 2006. The second expedition, EXERCISE JURASSIC SHARK 2, took place in October 2008 and tagged a further 20 sharks (including 10 great white sharks)

off Guadalupe and the Revillagigedo Islands (Mexico). The second expedition was awarded the Duke of Edinburgh's Prize for the British Sub-Aqua Club in November 2009.

This latest expedition, called EXERCISE JURASSIC SHARK 3, was the third shark tagging expedition to be conducted by the Joint Services Shark Tagging Team. The aim was to continue the work of the previous expeditions by tagging a total of 15 sharks with acoustic tags – bringing the total number of tagged sharks to 50. The tags send signals to underwater radio receivers allowing the movements of the sharks to be recorded. Overall, 13 scalloped hammerhead sharks; one Galapagos shark and a black tip shark were acoustically tagged. Data from four existing acoustic receivers was also downloaded and the batteries replaced. Finally, the team were also able to extend their work to include turtles: 12 Eastern Pacific green turtles were brought to the surface, measured, weighed, tissue sampled and tagged.

All tagging was carried out whilst the sharks were free swimming as this is the least stressful method for the animal. The sharks were tagged with acoustic transmitters, costing approximately £250 each, while the shark is swimming freely by divers using spear guns with specially adapted tips. The sharks enter a relatively relaxed state whilst being cleaned by small barber fish at 'cleaning stations' along the reef. This generally allows divers to get close enough to place a tag into the muscle below the dorsal fin. Scalloped hammerhead sharks in particular are notoriously shy and skittish so getting close enough to tag them requires considerable skill and patience. Shark numbers around Cocos Island are lower than has previously been the case as a result of both the effect of shark finning and the presence of warmer water associated with the *El Niño* effect. Nevertheless, the tagging effort was aided considerably by the use of rebreathers, which produce no bubbles.

The acoustic tags send signals to receivers located underwater at key points around the island, allowing the movements of sharks to be recorded and the movements of the sharks to be tracked – both around Cocos Island and between islands. Receivers are also located around the Galapagos (Ecuador) and Malpelo (Columbia) and the JSSTT has placed receivers around the Revillagigedo Islands and Guadalupe (Mexico) to the north. This research will help determine migratory routes. The information is needed to better protect the Cocos Island National Park and inform the scientific basis for the Eastern Pacific Tropical Seascape Initiative, which seeks to extend the protection given to this part of the Pacific. The expedition was led by Major Andy Reid (Army), who said, "an expedition such as this is all about experiencing controlled exposure to risk with the aim of developing the kind of leadership, teamwork, courage and co-operation that is vital to military operational capability. The expedition involved two important conservation projects, both of which exploit

the skills of a Joint Services team to best effect. Both sharks and turtles are in dramatic decline around the world and this is our chance to make a difference by establishing those parts of their habitat that most need protection.”

Corporal Andrew Jackson (Army), a member of the team who found a real niche for himself leading the measurement and weighing of turtles, said, “this was an exciting and rewarding project which has opened my eyes to the environmental issues facing shark populations today.” Similarly, Captain Caroline Zelaya (Army) said that the expedition was “a rare opportunity to make a real difference whilst doing something I love.”

Captain Simon Griffiths (Army) said, “I feel exceptionally privileged to have been able to take part in such an important conservation project; especially one as close to my heart as the conservation of sharks. They are a little understood group of animals that are becoming increasingly threatened in modern times. I really hope to be able to repeat the experience on a future expedition.”

Major Ian Macfarlane (Army), a Royal Engineers officer who deploys to Afghanistan within two days of returning to the UK, said, “Adventurous Training was not the reason that I joined the Army but expeditions like this are the reason why I stayed in.” Major Mark Foster (Army), a surgeon in the Royal Army Medical Corps said that “tagging 15 sharks would not have been possible without the amazing teamwork displayed by the entire team. This expedition is really the pinnacle of adventurous training within the Armed Services – providing a unique opportunity for military personnel from all ranks across the Services to come together in the pursuit of a unique environmental project.”

Corporal Phillip Blake (RAF) said, “being involved in this expedition was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Not only were we able to swim with these beautiful apex predators but we were also given the opportunity to work with members of the other Services in a uniquely positive and rewarding way. Seeing the abundance of sharks and other marine life in this truly wild environment was simply amazing. It is a good example of what all our oceans should be like.” Corporal Aaron Thomas (RAF) said, “sharks have fascinated me since I was a child, EXERCISE JURASSIC SHARK 3 offered a unique opportunity for me to help preserve these magnificent animals.” Corporal Jenny Beck (Army) the youngest and least experienced member of the team was probably the one most challenged by the whole experience. She said: “the expedition has been one of the best experiences of my entire life. I really hope that the work we have done will result in a better understanding of shark movements and help in the development of national and international strategies for their protection.”

Major Tom Wood (Army), the expedition doctor, summed up the expedition when he said, “it was a science experiment somewhat different (in terms of scale and location) to those I remember from School!” The expedition was sponsored by the Joint Services Expedition Trust and approved by the Royal Geographical Society. The scientific equipment was purchased with funds from the British Sub-Aqua Club (BSAC) and the Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) ‘Project Aware’ campaign.

The next JSSTT expedition is expected to involve tagging bull sharks in the rivers of the Corcovado National Park, Costa Rica – described by National Geographic as “the most biologically intense places on earth.” Major Reid noted that “bull sharks are one of the most challenging sharks it is possible to work with; however, it is the crocodiles that most concern us at this stage. This will be a remote, demanding and totally unique expedition that will really test the military team.”

Further information will be placed on the expedition website at [www.jurassic-shark.org.uk](http://www.jurassic-shark.org.uk) as it becomes available.

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