Shark tourism is a growing multimillion-dollar industry in which thrill-seeking tourists from all over the world pay locals to see and even swim among various shark species. “Today we looked into the eyes of Great Whites who came right up to the cage,” describes Maria C. Walker in a review posted to TripAdvisor. It is also an industry that provides seaside locals an economic alternative to shark fishing and the infamous practice of shark finning, or the act of removing a shark’s fins and dumping the live shark back into the water to die.

Shark tourism is a new wrinkle to the practice known as “ecotourism.” Ecotourism is “responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education” (“What Is Ecotourism,” 2015). Instead of selling the fins of sharks or harvesting them, locals make a living by taking tourists to shark feeding areas for non-lethal observation. However, there are increasing concerns over the form of ecotourism known as “shark cage diving.” As the name suggests, this thrilling experience involves a diver being lowered under water to observe sharks closely within the comfort and protection of a steel cage. Normally, sharks are shy creatures, but as National Geographic travel writer Andrew Evans notes, “sharks acting naturally does not fit our schedules and itineraries, thus shark cage diving operators must resort to the only thing that will get sharks to overcome their apprehension and swim extremely close to boats and humans: blood.” According to Evans, the relatively aggressive and exciting behavior displayed by sharks that divers observe in these artificial conditions is an aberration from natural shark behavior.

For tourists, the practice of shark cage diving leads to misinformation about typical shark behavior; for sharks, this can lead to an association between boats and easy food. It is because of the latter concern that Western Australia banned the practice in 2012. The area in question had not historically seen sharks congregated, but worries were increasing that shark diving operators might “maximize ground baiting to attract sharks to meet tourist expectations, which may have unwanted consequences” (Paris, 2012). Sharks associating boats and humans with food could cause them to become more aggressive around humans in the water, especially those outside of the safe confines of a shark cage. Norman Moore, the Minister for Fisheries in Western Australia at the time, took this course of action after four fatal shark
attacks—an abnormally high rate of incidents—occurred in his jurisdiction within a few months.

Shark cage-diving is an opportunity for local communities to engage in practices that are, at the very least, more sustainable than shark finning. However, that is not to say that cage-diving is morally justified. In fact, cage-diving has partly led to increased shark attacks in areas where it is practiced. As long as international regulations are not implemented, local governing bodies will have to weigh the negatives of cage-diving, i.e. more aggressive sharks, with the benefits of it, i.e. increased tourism and healthier shark populations.

**Discussion Questions:**

1. What values are in conflict over the practice of shark cage diving? What is worrisome about this practice?

2. Is there a way to encourage shark cage diving without these ethical concerns?

3. Do animals have to have moral value to show the benefits of ecotourism? Or is ecotourism oriented toward human well-being or other anthropocentric values?

4. Is ecotourism in general ethically problematic? If so, why? If only in certain ways or uses, explain how it can go wrong.

**Further Information:**


Walker, Maria, "Shark Cage Diving Today." *TripAdvisor*, 2019. Available at: https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g312659-d2150161-Reviews-Great_White_Shark_Cage_Diving-Cape_Town_Central_Western_Cape.html

**Authors:**

Nicholas Aufiero & Alicia Armijo  
The Ethics Project  
University of Texas at Austin  
October 16, 2019  

https://liberalarts.utexas.edu/ethicsproject/