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# MAKING WAVES IN CONSERVATION

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HANLI PRINSLOO

Hanli Prinsloo, an iconic South African free diver and creator of the I AM WATER Foundation, travelled to Cocos Island as part of an international expedition and high profile documentary film project to raise awareness for the plight of the sharks in our oceans. Eugene Yiga caught up with her to find out more.

## WHEN DID YOU START FREE DIVING?

I started free diving in Sweden, of all places! Deep, dark fjords offered the perfect backdrop for exploring this mental sport, which is about looking inwards, more than outwards.

## WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT BEING IN THE OCEAN?

I am in love with the sensation of weightlessness that being underwater offers us. In a busy world, I long for that state: complete immersion, quiet, and solitude.

## WHAT INSPIRED YOU TO START THE I AM WATER FOUNDATION?

After finishing competitive free diving, I started travelling around the world to dive with big animals, from manta rays and dolphins to whales and sharks. I experienced a connection and love for these creatures and their habitats – I don't think one can love something without wanting to protect it – as well as a realisation of the fragility of our oceans. This led me to dedicate myself to conservation through I AM WATER.

## WHAT DOES I AM WATER DO?

For us at I AM WATER it is not only about ocean conservation; it is about the development of a whole person. It is about the development of a person who understands their role on our planet and who experiences the great joy that our oceans have to share.

## COULD YOU TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR TRIP TO COCOS ISLAND?

Our boat, the *Undersea Hunter Argo*, travelled 36 hours from mainland Costa Rica into the Pacific waters before we reached Cocos Island. We shot numerous stories that will be aired around the world on World Oceans Day (8<sup>th</sup> June).

## PLEASE TELL US MORE ABOUT YOUR WORK WITH SHARKS?

I have been diving with sharks for over ten years now. As part of the I AM WATER Last Wilderness project we travel around the world to free dive with big animals, and sharks are often on the radar. They are an important part of the marine ecosystem, yet we hate and kill them mindlessly.



### WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES SHARKS ARE FACING RIGHT NOW?

Researchers agree that the staggering number of sharks killed each year by humans is between 70 and 100 million. Sometimes they're by-catch, caught while we are fishing for other fish, and thrown back dead. And oftentimes they are targeted for their fins and for food.

### WHAT IMPACT DOES THIS HAVE ON US AS PEOPLE?

For our planet to survive, we need healthy oceans. Healthy oceans need sharks. Predator loss has long been known to be one of the biggest de-stabilisers of any ecosystem. When predators are gone, a cascading effect takes place where other prey species boom and have devastating effects on the habitat.

### WHAT'S BEING DONE. BY YOUR FOUNDATION AND OTHERS. TO SAVE THE SHARKS?

At I AM WATER, we try to change perceptions, through good communication and beautiful imagery, and we also advocate with decision makers and influencers by engaging them in discussions, and also getting them in the water.

### HOW CAN EVERYDAY PEOPLE GET INVOLVED?

It's crucial for all consumers to become aware of where their seafood comes from. This way we can start eradicating the terrible by-catch problem. So when contemplating having fish for dinner, ask where the fish is from and how it was caught.

The South African Sustainable Seafood Initiative makes this easy for us. Just send the name of the fish as a text message to the number +27 79 499 8795 and you will get a prompt response telling you where the species is on the list, as well as some additional information such as minimum size and bag limit in the case of line fish. We have no excuse to say we did not know!

### WHAT IS YOUR ULTIMATE GOAL FOR YOUR FOUNDATION?

My goal is for I AM WATER to have a powerful global footprint, to ignite a movement of blue minds across the planet, to facilitate physical and emotional connections to the aquatic environment, to build understanding of the interdependence of healthy humans and healthy oceans, and to influence behaviour to protect our global seas.

*Hanli believes that education is the key. She encourages you to help share knowledge about sharks, their behaviour, and vulnerability. To stay in touch with I AM WATER and their projects (they often do outreach work in South Africa), visit [www.iamwaterfoundation.org](http://www.iamwaterfoundation.org).* ✕