

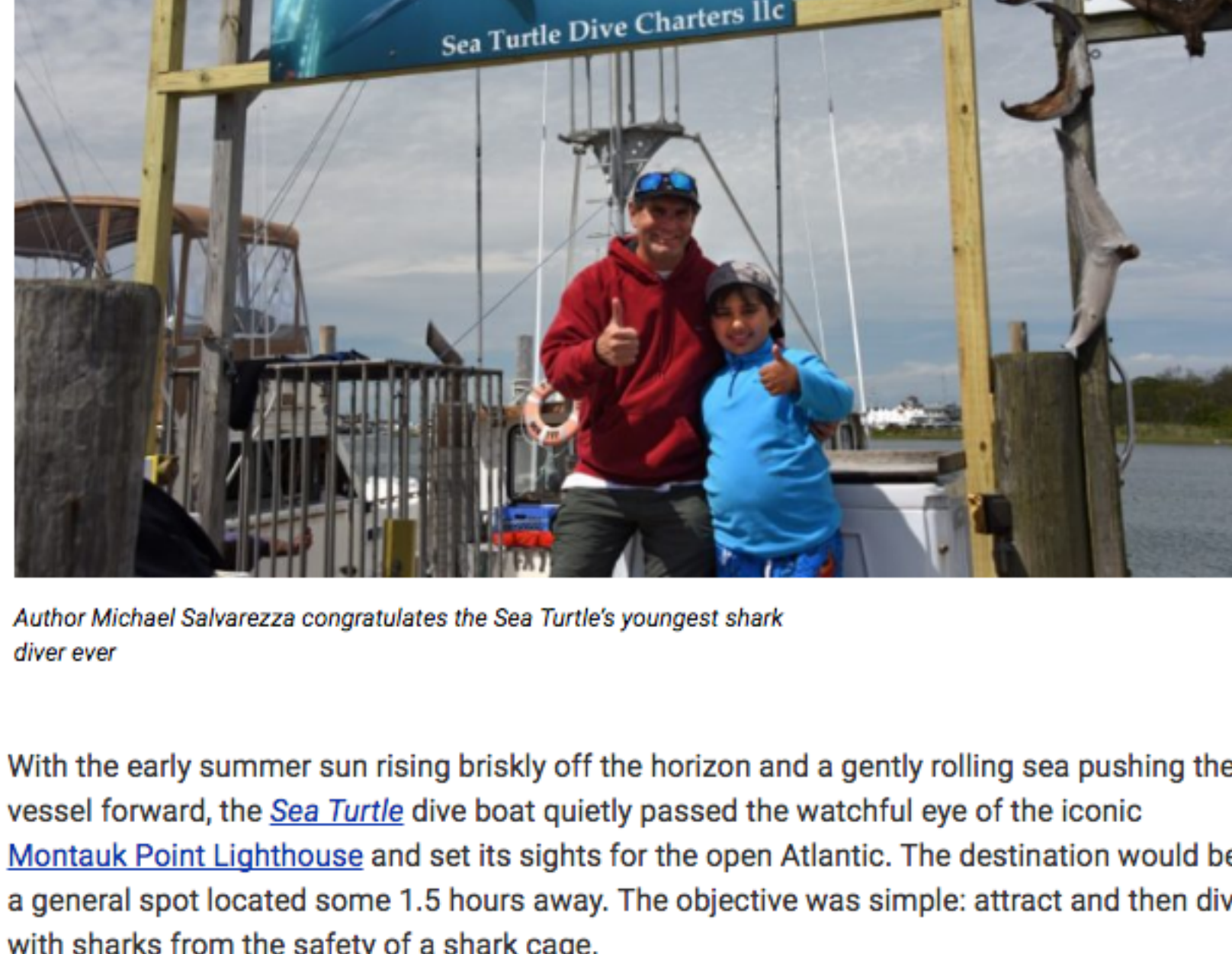
DIVE NEWS & EVENTS DIVE TRAINING ENVIRONMENT

Gabriel's Great Adventure: A Very Special Shark Cage Dive in Montauk, NY

CALIFORNIA DIVER - JULY 7, 2016

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Author Michael Salvatoreza congratulates the Sea Turtle's youngest shark diver ever

With the early summer sun rising briskly off the horizon and a gently rolling sea pushing the vessel forward, the *Sea Turtle* dive boat quietly passed the watchful eye of the iconic [Montauk Point Lighthouse](#) and set its sights for the open Atlantic. The destination would be a general spot located some 1.5 hours away. The objective was simple: attract and then dive with sharks from the safety of a shark cage.

For the *Sea Turtle*, shark cage diving is a routine affair. But this was no ordinary day and no routine shark cage dive. On board was Gabriel Gideon Basquez, an 8 year old from Denver, Colorado, who was born with a congenital heart defect known as [Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome](#). Gabriel's dream of diving with sharks was about to become reality.

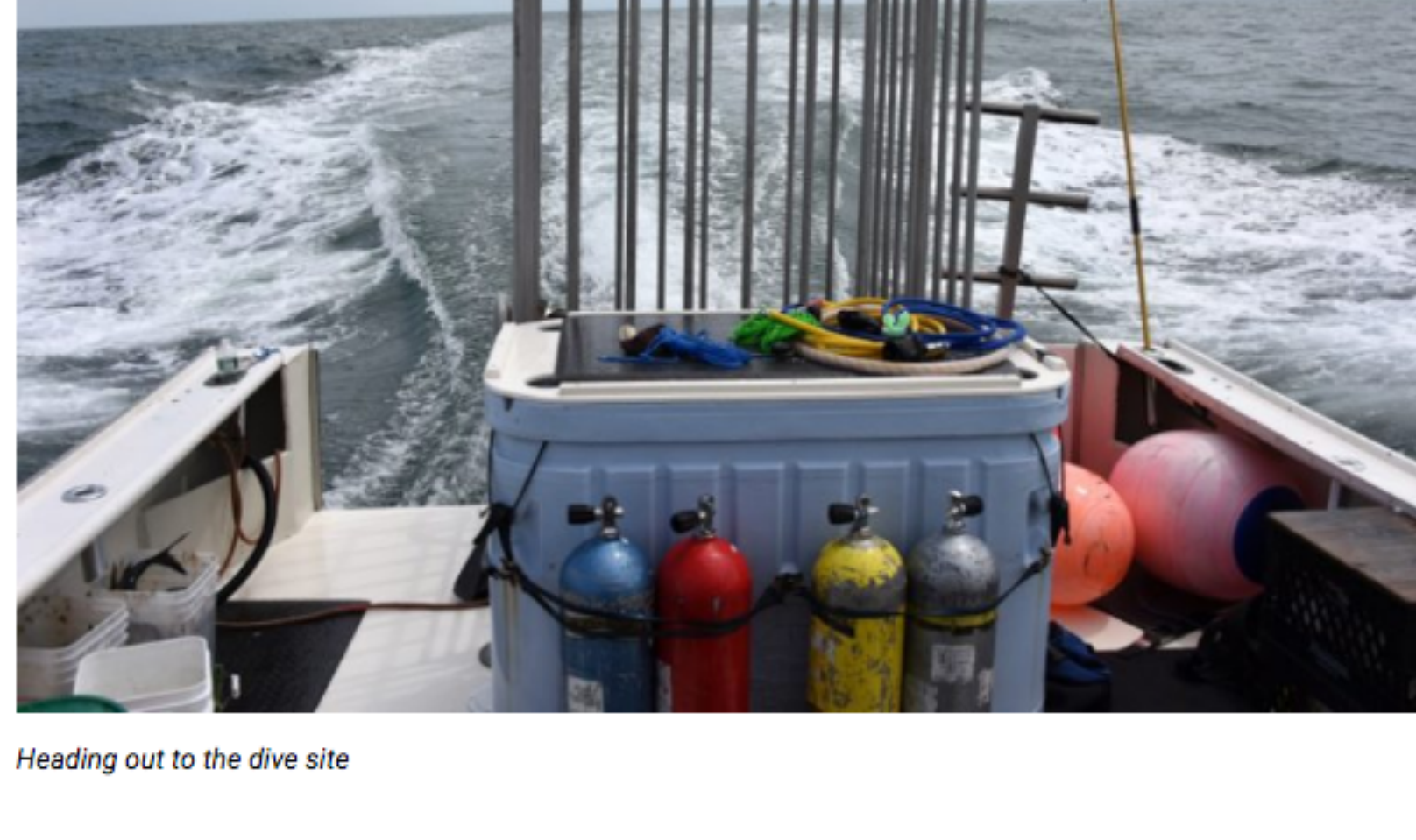
Text and Photography by Michael Salvatoreza and Christopher Weaver (Eco-Photo Explorers)



With mom Lisa and Sister Eden sleeping Gabriel is beaming after his shark encounter

Hypoplastic Left Heart Syndrome (HLHS) is a birth defect that affects normal blood flow through the heart. As the baby develops during pregnancy, the left side of the heart does not form correctly. Diagnosed during the pregnancy, the options for Gabriel were limited to four: terminate the pregnancy, offer compassionate care, conduct the Norwood procedure (a complicated surgery that attempts to reconstruct some of the heart components to create a somewhat functioning system) or receive a full heart transplant. After much soul searching, Gabriel's family elected to pursue a full heart transplant, and 2 weeks after birth Gabriel received his new heart.

Despite the success of that operation, Gabriel's condition is chronic and life-limiting. He will likely be fine and healthy through his teen years, but will require yet another heart transplant after that. Of course this makes his projected life span uncertain and at 8 years of age, Gabriel is almost half-way through this period of relative health. With the encouragement and support of his mother, Dr. Lisa Vallejos, and the rest of his family, Gabriel has begun assembling his very real "bucket list", which now includes Paragliding, meeting President Obama and seeing the Martin Luther King Monument.



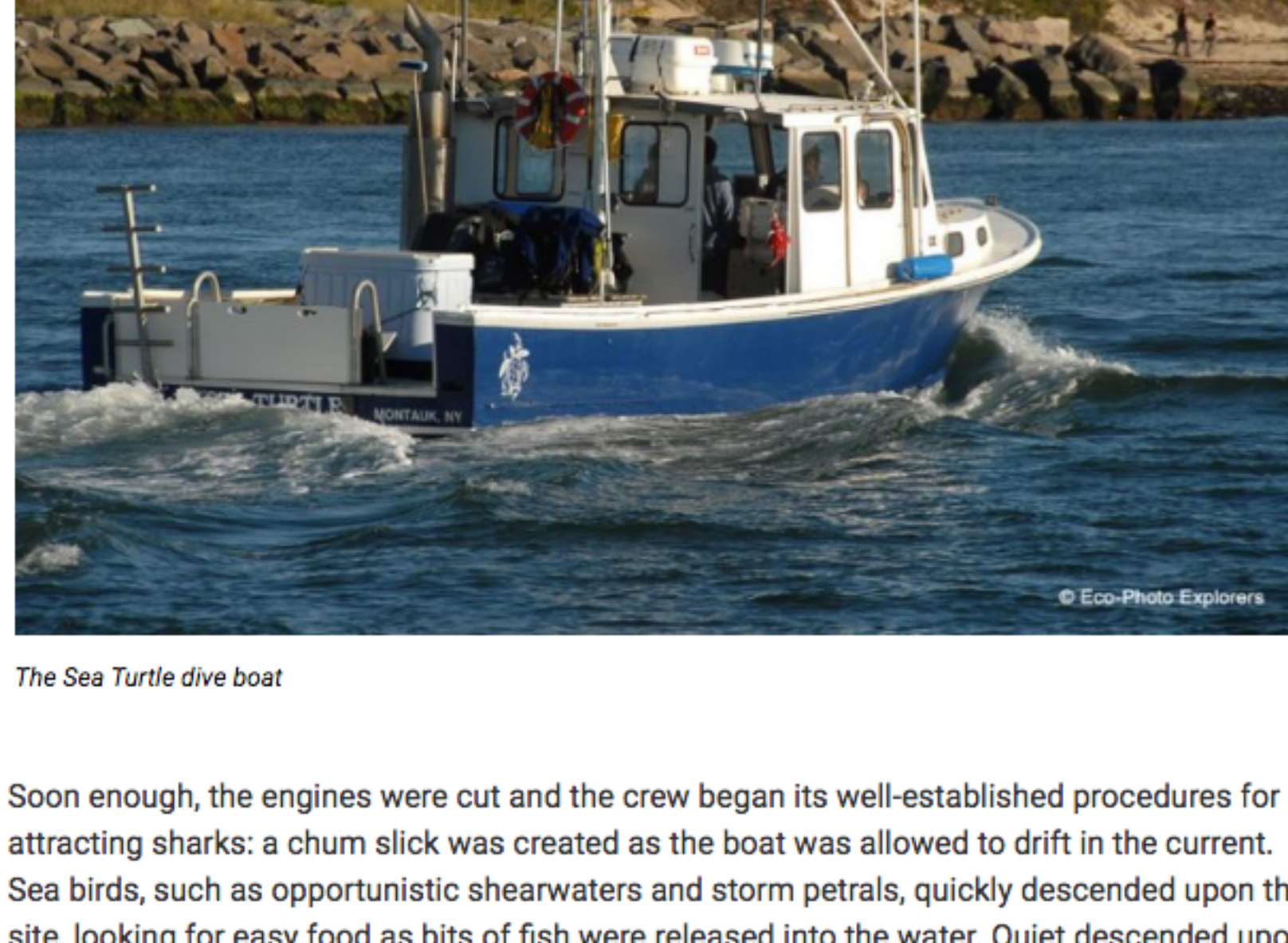
Heading out to the dive site

But topping the list is shark cage diving.

"He seems to have a special connection to sharks", says Vallejos, and this was evident as Gabriel boarded the boat wearing a San Jose Sharks NHL cap, shark patterned swim trunks and shark themed sunglasses.

Accompanying Gabriel on this life-altering journey were his mother Lisa, his grandmother Lydia, and his younger sister Eden.

The journey to the dive site was spent musing about sharks, talking about the procedures for entering and exiting the cage, and learning about the proper use of masks and regulators once inside the cage. It was also a time to enjoy the sunshine and the rolling swells of the Atlantic Ocean.



The Sea Turtle dive boat

Soon enough, the engines were cut and the crew began its well-established procedures for attracting sharks: a chum slick was created as the boat was allowed to drift in the current. Sea birds, such as opportunistic shearwaters and storm petrels, quickly descended upon the site, looking for easy food as bits of fish were released into the water. Quiet descended upon the boat and only the lapping of water against its sides punctured the serene silence as the crew and passengers waited for the first arrival of a shark.

After about an hour, the wait was over.

"Shark!" was the cry as the dorsal fin of an 8-foot Blue Shark pierced through the water off the starboard side of the boat. Suddenly, the excitement was palpable and the familiar quotations from the movies began to fly: "We're gonna need a bigger boat!"

Gabriel and his sister raced to the side of the boat and looked into the water in awe as the shark slowly swam back and forth several inches below the surface. As they gazed intently into the water, the cage was lowered and preparations for the cage dive began in earnest.

The *Sea Turtle* uses a hookah system for breathing and attaches the cage to the stern with specially adapted hinges. The cage can also be released and allowed to drift several feet from the boat to minimize rocking in rough seas. With sharks circling the boat, and with over a hundred feet of seawater below, the cage never leaves the surface.

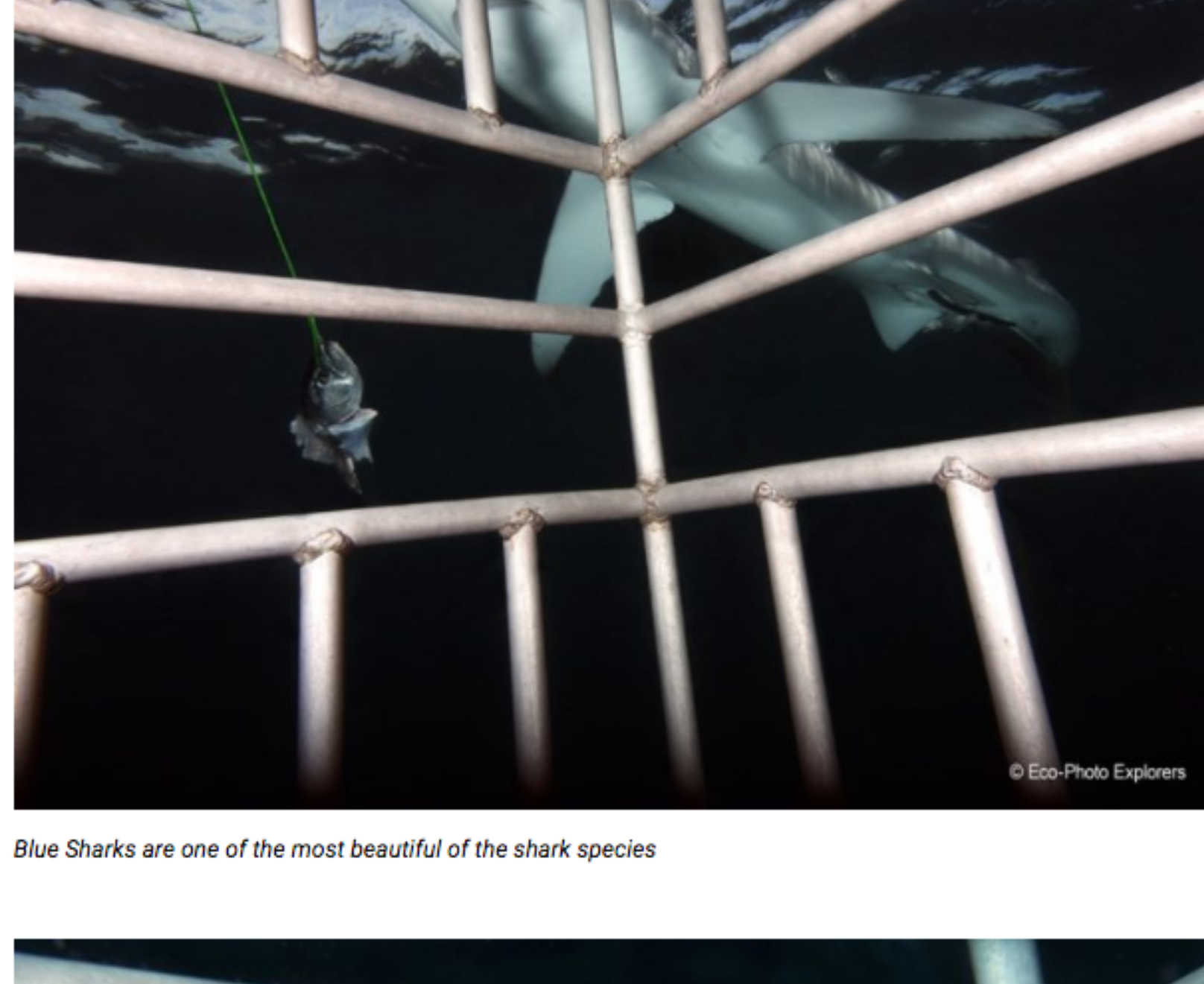


Author Michael Salvatoreza enters the cage with Gabriel Basquez to begin their shark cage adventure (photo by Chuck Wade)

It was now Gabriel's time to enter the water. Shy and unassuming, but plucky and determined, Gabriel quickly donned his wetsuit, put his mask on and began to gingerly step onto the top rungs of the cage. For an 8-year old from Denver, this was quite a moment. With his family intently watching from the boat, we watched from below in the cage as he slipped below the surface. By now, a significant ocean breeze had kicked up the water, and the chaotic rocking and clanging of the cage as it banged against the back end of the boat startled the youngster, who quickly made his way back to the surface.

Undeterred, however, he tried again...slipping down into the cool Atlantic water only to quickly return to the surface once more as his regulator slipped from his mouth.

The third time was the charm. Gabriel dropped into the cage, grabbed onto our arms and gazed out into the clear blue of the Atlantic to see the magnificent Blue Shark, with its indigo-colored back, pointed nose and aerodynamic pectoral fins languidly swimming within inches of the bars of the cage. Whatever discomfort Gabriel had with the cage and the ocean and the gear faded instantly as he locked eyes with the shark. His body relaxed momentarily, and he was transfixed by the experience of seeing a shark in the wild. A life's dream had been fulfilled, and a bucket list item checked off. In that special moment, as the two species connected through the bars of a cage, all of the stresses and burdens of Gabriel's condition disappeared. In that fleeting instant, it was simply an 8-year-old boy, filled with wonder and admiration, and an 8-foot blue shark, one foot for each of Gabriel's years.



Blue Sharks are one of the most beautiful of the shark species



Up close and personal with a Blue Shark

When asked later about which part of the day was the best for him, Gabriel flashed an infectious smile and simply said, "Everything!"

Soon, the shark had departed, off to find other prey in its daily struggle for survival in the open ocean. The *Sea Turtle* pulled the cage, packed its gear and headed for home. Gabriel and his family similarly headed for home, back to Denver, Colorado. For them it was a magical day. For us it was a heartwarming experience. But for Gabriel, it was a story he will tell with pride for the rest of his life.

Many thanks to Captain Chuck Wade of [Sea Turtle Charters](#) for hosting Gabriel and his family free of charge on this special day and for helping to make Gabriel's wish come true.

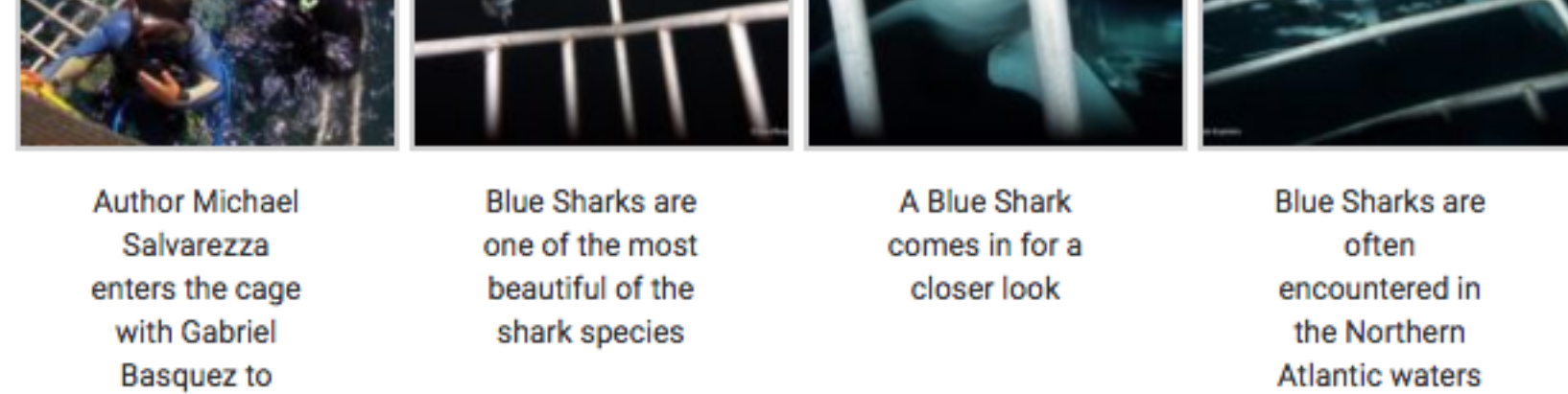
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For more information on Gabriel's story and his condition, and how you can help in the fight against congenital heart defects, visit [www.gabrielsgift.net](#)

For more information shark cage charters with The Sea Turtle, visit [www.seaturtlecharters.com](#)

Text and Photography by Michael Salvatoreza and Christopher Weaver (Eco-Photo Explorers).

For more information on Eco-Photo Explorers, visit [www.ecophotoexplorers.com](#)

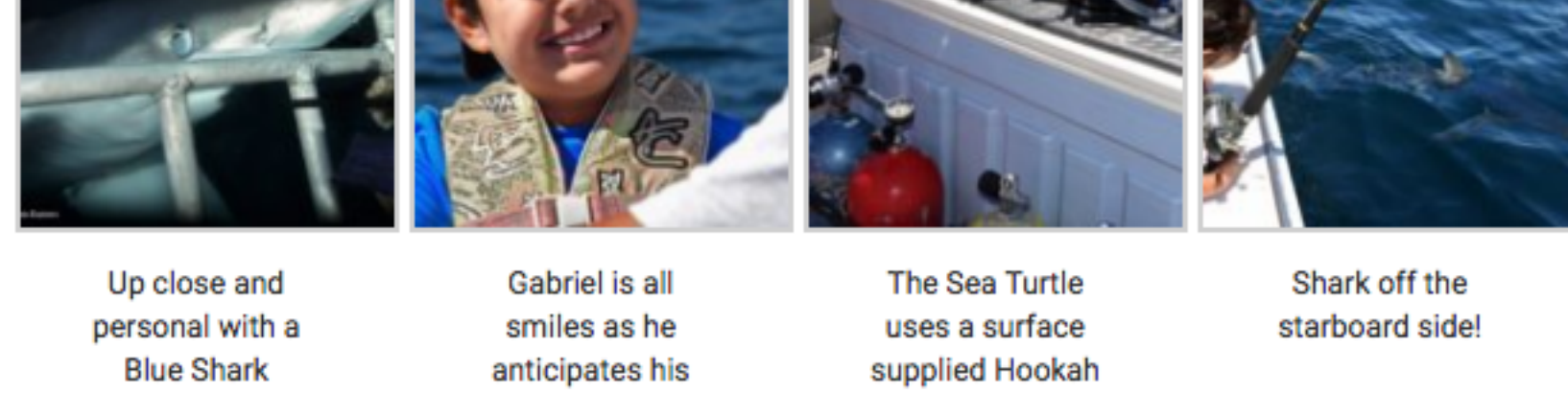


Author Michael Salvatoreza enters the cage with Gabriel Basquez to begin their shark cage adventure (photo by Chuck Wade)

Blue Sharks are one of the most beautiful of the shark species

A Blue Shark comes in for a closer look

Blue Sharks are often encountered in the Northern Atlantic waters off Long Island

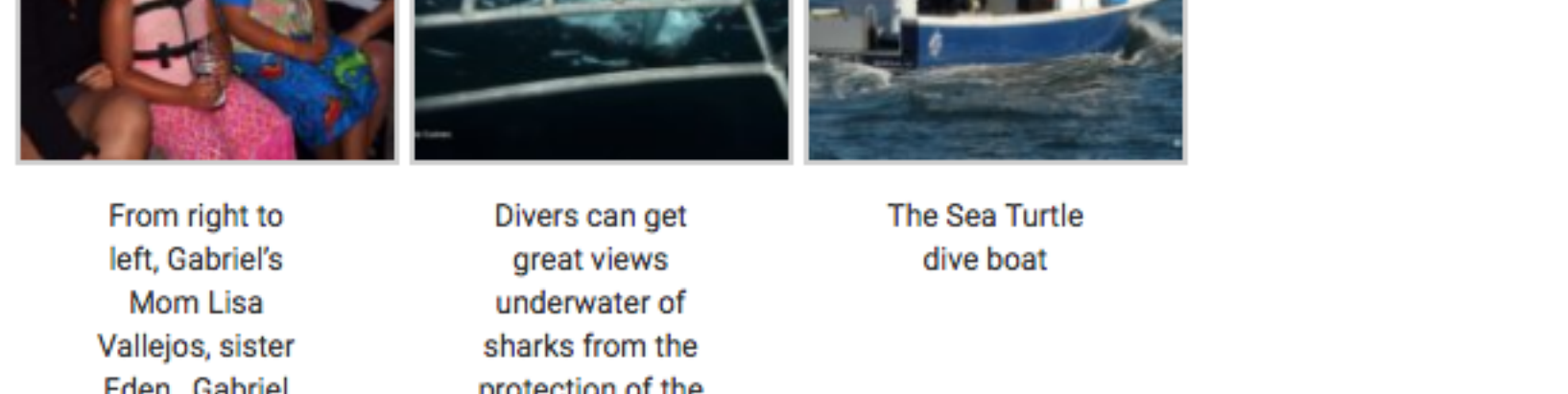


Up close and personal with a Blue Shark

Gabriel is all smiles as he anticipates his great adventure

The Sea Turtle uses a surface supplied Hookah system for air in the cage

Shark off the starboard side



From right to left: Gabriel's Mom Lisa Vallejos, sister Eden, Gabriel and Grandmother Lydia

Divers can get great views underwater of sharks from the protection of the shark cage

The Sea Turtle dive boat

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