



Jasmin Graham and Amani Webber-Schultz examine a young nurse shark.

SCIENCE LIVES

Just keep swimming

A shark scientist charts her own course

By Vijaysree Venkatraman

When a senior male scientist claimed data she believed belonged to her, Jasmin Graham—an early-career shark researcher in Florida—was disturbed and upset. And when the larger scientific community failed to intervene, she felt powerless. Dejected, Graham quit graduate school. Working late one night soon thereafter on a research paper that might be her last, Graham scrolled on Twitter, found herself swept up in the trending #BlackInNature, and connected with three other Black women shark scientists she had never met before.

On Juneteenth 2020, within weeks of meeting on Twitter, the quartet formed Minorities in Shark Sciences (MISS), a group devoted to providing opportunities and support to any gender minority of color studying sharks. Catherine Macdonald, a white shark scientist who was also part of the original Twitter conversation, offered the group the use of a research vessel for a meetup. Finding community reinvigorated Graham and convinced her to recommit to pursuing shark science on her own terms. Her new memoir, *Sharks Don't Sink*, documents how a young Black

woman dared to establish herself as a shark scientist outside academia. The book is also an ode to sharks themselves.

Graham fell in love with the ocean as a child when she went fishing with her father every summer in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. At a summer camp in high school, she learned that “marine scientist” was an actual job. She held a shark—a bonnethead—for the first time as an undergraduate researcher and became enamored with the creature, which was “all muscle and hydrodynamic perfection.”



Sharks Don't Sink: Adventures of a Rogue Shark Scientist
Jasmin Graham
Pantheon, 2024. 224 pp.

Sharks are prehistoric creatures that have survived all five known mass extinctions, but more than a quarter of the world's identified shark species are now threatened by extinction. Much research in shark science, Graham writes, is based on the idea that if we can better understand these creatures, we can better protect them.

The public mostly tends to see sharks as deadly killers—likely thanks, in part, to the fictional great white featured in the 1975 Hollywood thriller *Jaws*. They are rarely viewed as diverse, fascinating creatures that play a key role in maintaining balance in marine ecosystems.

Graham, who sees herself and her people in sharks, writes, “All too often Black people are perceived and treated much like sharks: feared, misunderstood, and brutalized, often without recourse; assumed to be threatening when so often we're the ones under threat;

portrayed unfairly in the media, so that others are predisposed to have a negative interaction with us.”

She works to change people's perceptions, providing diversity, equity, and inclusion training at universities to prevent attrition of talented people of color. Scientists, she writes, often have a particularly hard time accepting their own biases because they believe themselves to be entirely rational. So she gives them tangible tools they can use to ensure that they are not making unfair assumptions about minority students or mentees.

Graham has moved forward with her shark research as well. She published the paper that caused her so much angst, with a robust dataset gathered through collaboration (7). The scientist who used her data resigned. Macdonald—“the original Friend of MISS”—took his place.

Graham, who now serves on the board of the American Elasmobranch Society, could decide to earn her PhD and reenter academia, but for now she chooses to remain an independent researcher. “Going forward, I'm committed to contributing to peer-reviewed, quality publications, and doing research in a**hole-free spaces, only,” she writes.

For her next project, Graham plans to collect information about fishing stock and patterns from Black fishermen who have been fishing in Myrtle Beach for decades. In conservation circles, she writes, most assume that small fishers, especially those of color, are uneducated and have little to contribute to scientific research. Graham knows this is incorrect.

She will also continue her work with MISS. “I truly can't wait for the day when MISS no longer needs to exist,...when we don't need to fight to be heard or create a safe space,” she tells the group. “But, until then, we are here to help insulate you as much as we can from the BS we had coming up.”

Sharks Don't Sink is an accessible book about life as a marine scientist—and an empowering one. Graham writes in a straightforward, direct way about the sexism and racism many in the sciences have become inured to. Doing nothing, she reminds readers—whether in response to social injustice or to the destruction of the natural world—supports the status quo. We owe it to ourselves and to the planet to take action. ■

REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1. J. Graham *et al.*, *Endanger. Species Res.* **44**, 45 (2021).

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