



## Profile

**MICHAEL AW IS AN AWARD-WINNING PHOTOGRAPHER, AUTHOR AND EXPLORER...**

● Michael is the winner of nearly 70 international awards, including the Gold Diver award for the Portfolio category at the 2010 World Festival of Underwater Pictures.

● His pictures have been published in *National Geographic*, *Nature*, *BBC Wildlife*, *Smithsonian*, *Ocean Geographic* and *Asian Geographic*.

● He is a Fellow of the International League of Conservation Photographers and a Fellow International of The Explorers Club, New York.

All images: © Michael Aw

# MICHAEL AW

As Michael Aw prepares for an expedition to the Arctic, he tells Keith Wilson about going head to head with sharks, being thrown into the air by whales, and why he talks to fish...



**B**orn and raised in Singapore, Michael Aw was in his mid-30s when he decided life would be better if he spent more of his time underwater rather than trying to keep his head above it...

**What triggered your interest in the underwater world?**

I worked in advertising for 14 or 15 years and I've always been curious about exploring anything new, so when I finished my commercial life and was out exploring the world, I started scuba diving and taking pictures. I feel more comfortable underwater than on land because at least it's not hot!

**How old were you when you were first learned to dive?**

I learned to dive in 1981. I turn 60 this year, and when I was 34 or 35, I quit my full-time job and decided to travel and start taking pictures.

**What do you particularly enjoy about diving?**

I love nature and animals, but if you go into a forest or even on safari there is always a barrier between you and the animals, whereas underwater you are part of that environment and the animals come straight up to your face. You can reach up and touch them if you want to, whereas in the forest you can hear the animals but sometimes you can't even see them, or you only get a glimpse and they're gone. I feel so much a part of the environment once I'm in the water that I feel I belong there.

**You must have had some magical encounters with aquatic creatures while diving...**

Oh yeah, many. Every time I go into the water, every dive – I stopped counting when I reached 5000, and I think I have had 10 or 15,000 dives now – rarely has there been one where I have not had an interaction with an animal. I like to see the fish,



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**BRYDE'S WHALE**  
**GULPING DOWN**  
**SARDINES**  
**Nikon D3s, Nikon**  
**AF-S 14-24mm**  
**f/2.8G ED, 1/250**  
**sec, f/9, ISO800**



**CLOWN FISH LIVING**  
**IN WHITE ANEMONE**  
**Nikon D300s, Nikon**  
**AF-S 60mm f/2.8G**  
**ED, 1/160 sec, f/36,**  
**ISO250**

whether small or big. Every time I talk to the fish!

**When was your first underwater image published?**

I first got published in the early 1990s. I got on the cover of a magazine with an image of a clown fish. Incidentally, the first animal I saw underwater – I learnt to dive in Singapore where the water is murky and dirty – was a clown fish. Then, when I did my first book in 1993, I spoke to the publisher and insisted on having a certain picture on the cover, but he came back and said, 'No, you can't have this on the cover because it won't sell the book.' Next thing, he looked through the book and picked the same clown fish for the cover of the book! We had two reprints and sold 20,000 copies, which for a coffee table book that sold for \$80 was not bad.

**Scuba or snorkel?**

Well, to get into the environment, to stay down because we are not a fish,



I was just shooting, hoping to get my shot, when the whale came up from the deep and lifted me out of the water

I choose diving, because I can go where I want to be and I don't have to come out for any length of time. But the freedom and quietness of snorkelling is unbeatable, because even if you scuba you can hear your bubbles, whereas with snorkelling you're freer, you move much faster and you're less invasive. Basically, I'll do whatever works to do my job, but as a personal preference when I'm not shooting, when I just want to enjoy the environment, I'll choose scuba because I can stay down and pretend to be a fish!

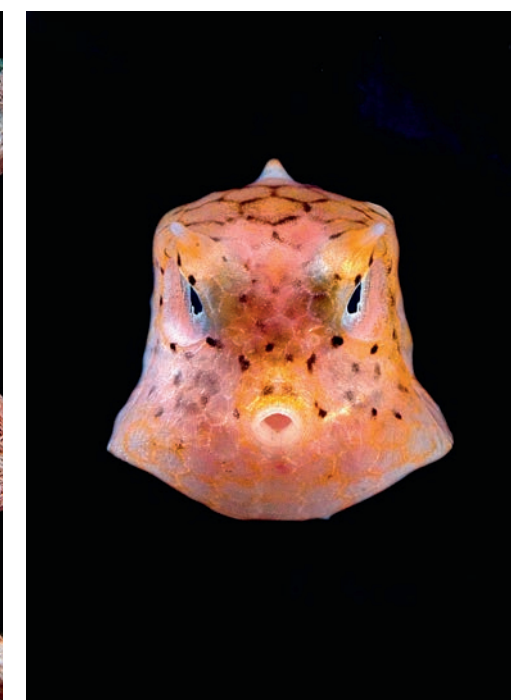
**You have won numerous photography awards. What do you look for in your own pictures?**

I compose a shot in my mind before I shoot it, and it has to be possible for me to shoot it in that moment. I want to take pictures that are my own and that nobody can duplicate. For example, the shot that won the Underwater category of last year's Wildlife Photographer of the Year, which was taken off the Eastern Cape of South Africa [see main image, previous spread] – I don't think anyone can duplicate that picture.

**It's an extraordinary image.**

**Did you feel at the time that you were taking something that was truly special and that you wouldn't be able to repeat?**

For that shot I was in that particular situation for many hours – in fact, it was from 9.30 in the morning till about four in the afternoon, and I was totally exhausted. There were three or four whales around us, there was this huge big ball of sardines, and I was just shooting, hoping to get my shot, and I was thrown up out of the water by the whale maybe five times. The whale came up from the deep and lifted me out of the water and



**Clockwise from top:**  
**DEEP SEA**  
**JELLYFISH**  
**YELLOW BOXFISH,**  
**LARVAE STAGE**  
**PYGMY SEAHORSE**  
**ON CORAL**

**Which lenses do you use?**

When I started in the early 1990s I shot a lot of macros of small animals, so my main lens was the 60mm macro. I used that lens about 80 per cent of the time and the other 20 per cent I used a wide-angle lens, like the 18mm prime lens. Those were the two lenses I brought with me for the first five or six years of shooting, and sometimes I used Nikon's 105mm micro. But these days, as I get older,



I stopped counting when I reached 5000 dives, and I think I've had 10 or 15,000 now





the small things become more difficult to see. Now, we are shooting small little snails or shrimp the size of a grain of rice, but it's easier for me to shoot a shark or a whale because I can't miss! So I use a wide-angle lens like a 15mm Sigma or the 16mm fisheye, then if I'm not sure what I'm getting I put on my 16-35mm zoom lens. It's like my insurance lens, so I pack that first, but I never go without the 60mm macro.

**Can you list the typical array of Nikon cameras, lenses and other equipment that you take with you?**  
I'm leaving in a few days for Socorro

and I always have the fastest camera possible, because I shoot a lot of action like the sardine run, animal movement and behaviour. Right now, I have a D5, but my housing for the D5 is not ready yet, so I'm using my D4. That's my main camera body, because it's fast and I rarely miss a shot. Then, for my seascape stuff, that will be a D800 because I can be slow and compose my shot. But I'm considering going back to a crop-sensor camera like the new D500 or D7200. They are very good cameras, and when I shoot macro I gain because of the cropped sensor, so when using the 60mm macro lens it's



**GREEN SEA  
TURTLE, BORA  
BORA, TAHITI**  
Nikon D2x, Nikon  
AF-S DX 10.5mm  
f/2.8G ED Fisheye,  
1/160 sec, f/16,  
ISO160



**MANTA RAY,  
CORAL BAY,  
WESTERN  
AUSTRALIA**

actually a 90mm. So, the three cameras I will carry for a main expedition will be a D4 or D5, then a D800 and now maybe I will also carry a D7200 or D500.

## How do you stay on top of your image workflow?

First of all, I don't delete any pictures on any of my cards. I bring enough cards to cover the whole trip, so when I come back from a dive at the end of the day I will back up my cards onto a portable hard drive. I have all my cards there and I know I have some good shots then, so I look through it and I start renaming the shots, and entering any new animals or interesting information, and at the same time including the metadata. When I get home I load up the whole thing onto my hard drive at home, so it's now backed up twice. Then my assistant will get involved and start looking at the good pictures, and the editing and post-processing I will handle myself.

## You must take a lot of cards then – how many and what size?

I still won't go to those extreme cards like 128Gb – I still prefer to work with 32Gb cards because if they get corrupted, you know, the bigger the card the more trouble you get. I like to take my card out at the end of the day, or even after a couple of hours. I like to load up with a new card on every dive. You don't want to go into the water with, say, half a card, because you know when you do that you will run out of pictures and you're stuck underwater. I don't like that happening to me, so I bring 50 to 100 cards all the time.

I have just placed an order for another 20 cards today.

## Where do you derive your photographic inspiration? Are you ever inspired by other underwater photographers like David Doubilet?

David has been my personal friend for a long time now, since the mid-1990s. He always manages to stay ahead of the game. How do you get ahead of him? That is the challenge! I always try to do something that he hasn't done before, and every once in a while I manage to do that and I can go to David and say 'Look, I've just



## QUICK AS A FLASH

**FLASH IS CRUCIAL FOR UNDERWATER PHOTOGRAPHY, AND MICHAEL HAS FOUND A WAY TO SHOOT A PROLONGED BURST OF FLASH-LIT IMAGES**

### What flash system do you use for taking photos under water?

I usually bring around four strobes with me and the ones I use are the Seacam 150 strobes, or the Ikelite 161s. They all have an exposure setting of 24, and the beauty of the Ikelite 161 is that if I set it at quarter power I can fire continuously for 50 frames and the flash will keep up with it! I've tested it to prove that it can be done, and actually used the Ikelite this way.

### Really?

It's amazing, yes, you just trigger and 50 flashes fire non-stop. You release it, recharge, and you go again. I like to get very close to my animals, with the mantas and the whales. I like to use a fisheye. I'll be about two or three metres away from the animals. I only like a little light on the animals, so I have good shadows, reflection on the eyes and also part of the body. I don't like to light the whole animal entirely.







done this.' That is my motivation, to do something that he has not done before.

**Is there a particular species of marine life that you never tire of photographing?**

I like to say sharks, but that's not true. The animal I find that can almost anticipate what I am doing is actually a species of fish, the blennies. They're small with big brown eyes. They seem to read what you're doing. They bounce around a lot. That has been a challenge for me since I started shooting in the early 90s. So, to this day, I will always have my cameras ready to shoot blennies, because that fish has personality and there's maybe about a hundred species of them found in all parts of the world, including the Arctic and Antarctic Oceans, but especially in the Tropics there are a lot of them.

**You also mention sharks?**

I have a lot of time for sharks because they are like this beast in the ocean

that people are afraid of and they are very smart, they can read you. I always say the most dangerous shark is the shark that you can't see. Sometimes, one will come up right in front of you and give you a dare, and that's when you put your camera in front of you and it will come at you and give you a nudge and take a bite on the housing port. I lead dive trips, and in one situation I had six guests around me and I saw a shark come in and check up every single port and then he came back to one and just bit the port. So, I've got time for sharks. I've done all major sharks from the tigers to the hammerheads, to the great white, silky sharks, threshers.

**Which assignment has presented you with the biggest challenge?**

The last few years from 2009 to now, because of climate change, we have to work more in the polar environment and we're not meant to survive -1°C water! In 2001 we were constantly dealing with -1° and -2°C water, then last year when we were in

↑  
**GREAT WHITE,  
GUADALUPE,  
MEXICO**  
Nikon D2x, Nikon  
AF-S DX 12-24mm  
f/4G IF-ED, 1/250  
sec, f/8, ISO250

↪  
**SARDINE RUN,  
SOUTH AFRICA**  
Nikon D3s, Nikon  
AF-S 14-24mm  
f/2.8G ED, 1/250  
sec, f/3.2, ISO2000

→  
**A LEOPARD SEAL  
COMES IN CLOSE  
TO INVESTIGATE  
MICHAEL'S  
CAMERA**

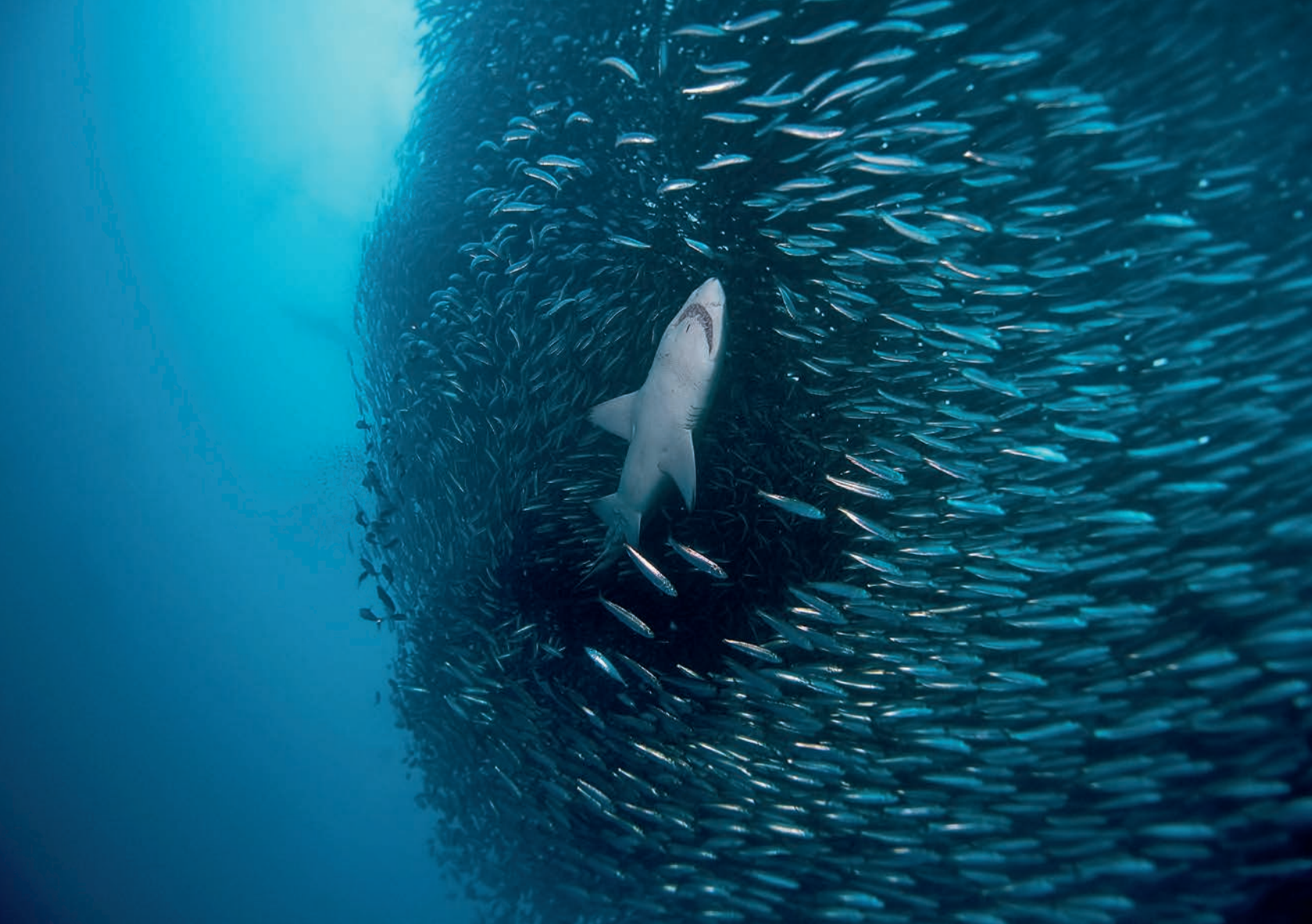
the Arctic, because of global warming, we were dealing only with +1°C water, because it's warmer now than ever before. But for cameras, equipment, our own comfort, cold is a big challenge. If your hand is frozen you can't shoot, so it's more challenging as an environment and your camera takes a beating.

**You're off to the Arctic again soon. What is the purpose of that trip?**

I'm off with a scientific group from the University of Alaska. We're going into the Barents Sea, so we're shooting above water and at the same time underwater and doing a lot of sampling of animals, seeing how warming water affects the food source, plankton, of animals up there. It's a 45-day expedition. There will be whales as well, I hope!

**Are you expecting to find some species that you haven't photographed before?**

With the deep oceans you always get new animals. Always. We know so







**SCALLOPED HAMMERHEADS, COSTA RICA**  
Nikon D4, Tokina 10-17mm, 1/640 sec, f/20, ISO1250



**DOLPHINS, BAHAMAS**  
Nikon D3s, Nikon 14-24mm, 1/500 sec, f/2.8, ISO1600

little of the deep ocean. When you start trawling, start bringing animals from the deep up to the surface, you always have something new.

**Speaking of marine animals, has there been a particularly close encounter with one that you have experienced as an underwater photographer?**

My most memorable experience was in about 2005. I did a shoot in French Polynesia and this guy says, 'I can get you to the open ocean and we are going to bring some open water

sharks into your environment so you can get some pictures of them.'

I said, 'What will we get?'

'Oh, you'll get some silky sharks, some great hammerhead sharks.'

There are four of us: him, me and my assistant, and the driver of the boat. We head up the channel and out into the open ocean, then descend down to 25 metres. The next thing I know the guy in the boat is throwing rocks into the ocean. So it's raining little rocks and these rocks stimulate the sharks to come up from the deep to investigate what is happening up

above. In the ocean, little rocks raining down is like sick fish, or fish struggling in the water, that's how it sounds, and a big shark comes in to check us out. Open water sharks are always very hungry sharks, as there's not much to eat out there, so they begin circling us. I've got my set-up with me and my assistant has my other camera with her.

I'm shooting for 20 minutes and when I finish with one camera I take the other camera. Halfway through, I think "This is not good because we can't go to the surface," because

when sharks are circling you, they go tighter and tighter. Sure enough, the shark comes in and charges me, so I have to use my camera to push it away! Of course, you can do this a few times but you get tired. So my assistant is holding me, and her eyeballs are wide open and she



The shark took a bite out of my strobe and the whole thing exploded



is pushing the shark from the back and I'm pushing the shark away from the front. The guy on the surface has no idea what's happening beneath because we're 25 metres down and he is still throwing little rocks in and getting more sharks!

The shark takes a bite out of my strobe and the whole thing explodes. He's still coming and this strobe is dangling from its arm, but we are fortunate in that while all this is happening a dolphin appears.

**A dolphin?**

A group of dolphins, actually. Half a dozen of them. As soon as the dolphins come the shark disappears. Once you go into the open ocean there's no place you can hide. Now, whenever I'm dealing with big animals I'm very careful.

**What is the best piece of advice you can give to someone wishing to become a professional underwater photographer?**

You need to answer another question: how much do you want to do it? You must have the passion. If you want to be a professional at doing this then you have to keep on trying, never stop, get out there and shoot as much as you can. Keep on trying and you will get your break. Now, with social media, it is quite easy to get attention, but getting likes on Facebook, putting pictures up there, that's not what you

## SAVING SHARKS

**SINCE 2000 MICHAEL HAS BEEN CAMPAIGNING TO PROTECT SHARKS, ESPECIALLY IN SOUTH-EAST ASIA AND CHINA, BY LOBBYING AGAINST EATING SHARK FIN SOUP...**

**How effective is the campaign from your point of view?**

Numbers have dropped, for sure. In the last few years, in Hong Kong and Singapore, there's been a 50 per cent drop in the import of shark fins. That is a very dramatic drop, but because the industry is so big – you're talking about 100,000 tons – a typical shark fin restaurant in Singapore can sell about one ton of shark fins a week. For one ton of shark fins, you're talking about 2000 sharks.

want. What you want is to get people to recognise your work, and to do something new. Get out there and do something that nobody has ever done before. I think that is the most important thing.

**See more of Michael's amazing work at [www.michaelaw.com](http://www.michaelaw.com)**

NEXT MONTH: INTO THE WILD WITH NEW NIKON AMBASSADOR RICHARD PETERS