

Ryan Johnson interview

For more information on my life with sharks, please check out the 'ask Ryan' section of the site, or contact me at info@ryan-johnson.org

Questions for Men's Magazines

- What is your workout routine / how do you stay fit?

I have two routines that I get into for fitness, one for the time I am based at Mossel Bay, and one for when I am in the field. In Mossel Bay, I spend a lot of time playing squash, running or cycling. Often I hit the gym, but as Mossel Bay is such a stunning area and has a great climate it is nicer to be outdoors

When I am in the field, I am usually in remote places without many fitness facilities, such as gyms. In these places it is about moving, so often I go swimming or cross country rambling. I usually carry a skipping rope to get active in the mornings.

- Your diet:

As my partner, Fiona, is a vegetarian we don't eat much meat at home, and rather have lots of non-meat protein such as tofu, soya etc with salads and vegetables. I also take advantage of the great fruit in South Africa by making fruit smoothies for breakfast. On the weekends, I enjoy a South African Braai (barbeque) with my buddies and students. This is as much about the social good time as the lamb chops.

I don't eat a lot of marine food for ethical reasons, such as, over fishing and exploitation. I follow the guidelines South Africa's sustainable seafood initiative (SASSI) (www.wwfsassi.co.za) in which over exploited species are identified and recommended to avoid. Also I will not eat prawns due to the horrendous by-catch associated with this fishery.

- Favorite alcoholic beverage:

It changes with my moods and social situation, but a constant favorite is brandy mixed with coke. It is a very popular drink in the coastal fishing towns of South Africa, and this is where I learned about the joys, and dangers, of brandy.

- Hobbies / What do you like to do in your spare time / How do you relax?

Most of my spare time away is spent diving with my girlfriend Fiona. She is a fantastic underwater photographer, so I spend a lot of the time lugging her equipment around, and modeling for her in underwater photographs.

If I need time alone, I enjoy spear fishing or just shallow free diving alone. It is incredibly therapeutic to be totally alone at the bottom of the ocean on breath hold and just listen to the crackling of the reef. I rarely spear any fish, except if I am going to cook it for dinner.

- Favorite and least favorite destination:

My favorite place ever is Mozambique. It has stunning marine life, people, cashews, and is wild enough to give you that feeling of becoming part of Africa. I remember a buddy and I

spending two hours trying to force his 4x4 and zodiac boat up the sand 'driveway' to his section. After we finally made it, we enjoyed a beer in the grass hut that he built on a coastal point with a 270' sea view. We were joined by his three dogs and a brave little cat. His father, who had passed away the year before, was buried a few 100m away and we watched the sunset in silence appreciating earth. You can't beat those kinds of experiences.

My least favorite place is anywhere

I enjoy small towns, country, and no crowds. So whilst short stints in the big cities are exciting, if I am there too long they become debilitating. A few months ago I went to Cairo, and while been wrapped up in the excitement and bustle, I knew I would not last long there.

- Worst predicament you encountered on the job:

I have encountered many great white sharks while scuba diving and free diving before, and only once have I felt any danger. It happened to be the one time I entered into 'white shark waters' without some form of protection (spear gun or a poking stick) and I was alone. The shark tested me for about 20 minutes circling and approaching me. I knew I could not swim away, and had to hold my ground, ducking underneath the shark on every approach. I was obviously breathing hard (due to nervous energy) on my scuba and I had the awful predicament of making myself very vulnerable to the shark by surfacing in its presence, or staying put, and running out of air. Luckily I stayed put, and the shark left (as they usually do). Looking back I feel privileged that I had such an intimate encounter, and it confirmed to me that humans can interact with even the most interested great whites if you don't panic.

- Name brands/article of clothing you trust when in the field:

Any time that I get to wear National Geographic clothing it is a thrill. National Geo is iconic and represents adventure, research, exploration, knowledge and conservation. Wearing their clothes and using their products allows me to showcase a brand that I have great respect for.

Another brand I admire is Carcharias, a clothing range that started in the white shark cage diving capital of South Africa, Gansbaai. It was started by a passionate and creative Argentinean diver. It presents uncompromising messages regarding shark and ocean conservation in a very humorous and engaging manner (www.carcharias.org).

- Your definition of success:

What is termed success differs amongst all people, so there can't be a single definition. I think a core point is to determine what your goals in life are (e.g. having a happy family, generating wealth, enjoying every day of your life, or making sacrifices for a social or environmental cause), and if you are fortunate enough to reach them, then you are successful.

For me, I have dedicated my life to making a positive contribution to the oceans, be it through research, conservation or education. Every time I hear that my work makes a small difference or inspires another human to make a contribution, I feel successful.

- Biggest fear:

I believe something in society has made us fearful of nature, and our abilities as humans to survive and interact with nature. We limit ourselves and forget that we did not always have

concrete walls, airplanes, or mammoth houses or even cars. My biggest fear is that I accept these limitations that society attempts to put on you as true. When you succumb to these societal fears you miss out on many wonderful adventures and experiences.

Oh, and falling off a chair – annually, many more people die from this than from shark bites.

- Your Hero is:

Ten years ago when I traveled to South Africa, I knew that it was only possible because of the liberation struggle conducted by the African National Congress (ANC) and other freedom fighters. My hero was, and still is, the former ANC leader Madiba (Nelson Mandela). South Africa is incredibly dynamic politically and socially, through all this turmoil Nelson Mandela has been the beacon of integrity and morality. A few years ago, I picked up a rock from his prison yard on Robben Island, each day I look at it and remember the sacrifices he made for his beliefs.

- What is on your IPOD (what music/bands are you listening to):

I'm a big fan of South African music artists like Arno Carstons, Freshly Ground and Watershed. Otherwise I like heading a few years into the past, and enjoy Dire Straits, the Police, U2, The Eagles, Simon and Garfunkel.

- What are you reading? (books):

After plowing through academic papers for many hours, I usually go for very easy reads to relax. I enjoy the adventures of NUMA written by Clive Cussler, novels by Michael Crichton and John Grisham. Of books that stand out to me, the South African epics by Bryce Courtney are very special, and in particular, *The Power of One* and *Tandia*. It was those stories that fostered my interest in Africa.

Questions for Women's magazines

- How long have you been married/ or dating? Kids?

I have been going out with my girlfriend Fiona Ayerst for three years now. We have one little boy named (shark) Finn who is 9 months old. Having a kid has changed my life forever, and is the best thing in the world!

- Your best Valentines Day tips: (romantic date, fav gifts etc)

Best tip - Remember it. I have learned the hard way the consequences of forgetting.

Last valentines was pretty sweet. We took a braai (barbeque) grid down to the beach, I made a fire, cooked Fiona vegetarian sausages, drank wine, listened to music, and chilled out.

- Best feature about your girlfriend:

Having the biggest and most beautiful heart in existence. Her giving, selflessness, and her humanity towards animals are an inspiration to me.

- What you don't understand about women is:

Everything; I am a bit absent minded with social things, so often I have to be sat down and have things explained to me.

- The chore you despise doing around the house:

Feeding our cat 'Nachie' at 5.30 in the morning when it gets hungry. After a half hour of constant meowing, it weakens my resistance and I succumb to feeding it. It is not a great way to start the morning.

- Will your kids follow in daddy's footsteps?

Finn will be All Black rugby player! But I would love it if they could enjoy some of the incredible places and adventures that I have been able to experience. I only hope that there are still sharks left in the oceans for my kids to see.

- How did you meet your wife/girlfriend?

Fiona was the underwater photographer on a documentary shoot that I was invited to contribute to. I guess that driving around in an underwater cage/submersible looked cool to her, and I thought a female free diving with great whites was pretty cool. We had heard about each other through the shark community, me as a shark scientist, and her as the director of Sharklife (www.sharklife.co.za), a shark conservation organization here in South Africa.

- If women are looking for rugged men, where should they go?

They could go and hang out at some of the rugby clubs in Otago, New Zealand. My old mates down there were the salt of the earth and as hard as nails. Playing rugby on frozen fields, followed by beer and a good kiwi party is pretty standard. What's more, most of them will do the dishes when they get home (as long as it's kept secret).

- Your "secret" talent is:

DIY repairs and additions around the house. With, I believe a success rate marginally over 50%.

- Hollywood celeb female crush?

That's hard, as the Hollywood celeb culture does not generally attract me. I am far more attracted to the spirit and passions of a woman. I reckon Michelle Obama is pretty cool.

- Hollywood guy that would play you in a movie:

I think it would have to be Colin Farrell. I have been stopped a few times and told we look similar. He has the genuine hardness and ruggedness that is rare in Hollywood, but is necessary when you live in Africa and do work like mine. If not Colin, maybe Russell Crowe.

- Best pet:

My old dog named Moulin, the most spirited and intelligent dog ever. I was broken when I had to give her up, but with a life that means I move around so much, it was not fair to keep her any longer