



**NOAA Teacher at Sea
Christopher Harvey
Onboard NOAA Ship OSCAR ELTON SETTE
June 5 – July 4, 2006**

Date: June 8, 2006
Time: 8:00 PM Hawaii
Speed: 0.0 knots
Depth: 83 m

Entry

A splash of water on my face, a trip to the head, and a brief breakfast before work...that is all I wanted as I laid in bed at 7:15. I wasn't looking for fame or fortune in today. I wasn't even looking for a penny on heads. All I wanted was a nice day full of sunshine and subtle rocking, and maybe a little "scientific work" on the side.

But today I officially became a man! At least, I'm going to put in my application now to become a man! I was interrupted from my breakfast of a sausage patty and fresh fruit by Garrett, one of the more experienced scientists onboard, to tell me that I had a meeting to attend. I was previously told that work began at 8 AM sharp, so my intentions were to enjoy my breakfast and then begin work at 8 AM sharp. Instead, I skipped the rest of breakfast, lubed up in suntan lotion, and hit the fantail of the ship for the first part of a very long day.

We set 160 traps around Necker Island yesterday afternoon. And after leaving them overnight, our task was to haul them up in the morning, take our catch to the lab to be scanned, weighed, and measured, re-bait the traps, and then stack them on the fantail to be set in new locations later in the day. Each scientist had a different job on the SETTE assembly line. There were 1) the "crackers," who opened the traps, removed any catch, and then re-baited the trap; 2) the "runner," who brought the empty trap down the line and dropped off the bucket with the catch at the intermediary wet lab; 3) the intermediary wet lab, who took the fresh catch into the wet lab for examination, and brought the measured catch back to a trash can filled with salt water to act as a holding pen until the catch could be re-inserted where they were taken from at the bottom of the ocean (our scientists took great care to ensure that each lobster was returned very close to where it was taken from by dropping them to the ocean floor in a cage with a quick release. Rather than just tossing them overboard, where predators could eat them on the way down, the lobster are securely released in their natural habitat.); 4) the wet lab scientists, who took the catch and performed the required measurements on them; and 5) the stackers, who took the empty, re-baited traps and stacked them on the fantail to await being reset.

I was a stacker today, and will be again tomorrow until my rotation is up. Stackers have the most difficult job because they have to stack the traps four high and then maneuver them across the deck and arrange them in a way so as not to clutter the deck. Then, when everyone else's job is done for the day, stackers are responsible for maneuvering the

same traps across the same deck in order to be set later in the afternoon. In addition, stackers have the joy of “swabbing the deck,” as I say in a not-so-good attempt to speak Pirate (Cakawww! My sister! Cakawww!). Yes, that means we get to scrub the fish blood and any other acquired nastiness from the deck with our toothbrushes! (Just kidding about the toothbrushes. We still use them to brush our teeth. We got to use regular, long-handled brushes for this task. But that doesn’t mean it was any easier or any more fun!)

We set 10 lines of 8 traps and 4 lines of 20 traps for a total of 160 traps in the water yesterday. So from 8 AM until about 1:30 PM we hauled in the traps. The hardest part of this was actually waiting for the ship to reposition after each string of traps. If we had one string of 160 traps, the job wouldn’t have taken so long. But we had to reposition the ship 14 times!

About 15 minutes after I stacked the last of the traps, I was given the order to begin setting them again. Talk about government work! Dig one hole, then turn around and fill it with sand! We set traps from about 1:45 until 4:00, with 20 minutes or so to clean the deck. I think the hardest part of the job was actually watching the deck go from being entirely empty, to entirely full, and then right back to being empty again. That makes you feel like you haven’t done a thing at all, and you are so darn tired at the end of it all.

But a rewarding thing, aside from the collection of great scientific data, was that we got to throw all of the old bait over the side of the ship. What do you think would take joy at the sight (or rather, smell) of rotten, dead fish? That’s right boys and girls, sharks!!!! In a matter of minutes we had about a dozen Galapagos sharks, raging from about 6 to 10 feet in length, fighting each other for the old mackerel. The entire ship, crew and scientists, gathered around the side to watch the sharks fight it out about 8 feet below. That was pretty cool! I offered to throw Ameer overboard, but she didn’t want to go. She said only if I went first. So I took a diving knife in my teeth, in the style of a true Pirate, and jumped over board to wrestle with the sharks! (Can you tell it’s been a long day? Of course, I didn’t wrestle with the sharks. But I did offer to throw Ameer overboard!)

After the long day of stacking and resetting the traps and swabbing the deck, I ate a brief dinner and watched the end of a movie. At this point I was notified that people were bottom fishing again outside. Those of you who know me know that I cannot turn down a chance to bottom fish, even if I am exhausted! So I headed outside to participate in the action.

But rather than fishing myself, I watched everyone else fish for a while. One thing that I have learned over the years is to *enjoy enjoyment*. When other people have an opportunity to enjoy themselves, sometimes it is best for me just to sit back and let them. So rather than fight my way into the fishing rotation, I let my colleagues fish away. Believe it or not, some of them have never gone fishing before! We used hydraulic wenchers to fish anyway. And that didn’t seem like true fishing to me. But since our goal was to catch fish in about 100 fathoms (600 feet) of water, you can count me out of fighting a fish all the way to the surface.

About midway through our fishing expedition, the sharks started showing up again. Kenji, one of the ship's crewmembers, caught a very nice sized snapper, but only managed to bring in a very nice sized head. A shark got the rest of the body! He later landed a good-sized grouper. It seemed strange at first to fish from the ship. But with scientific permits, we are able to collect specimen for measurements and population density studies. And after the fish have been chilled, the scientists cut into them and look for certain parts that tell them certain things (I don't have a great memory of what parts they look for, and although I am a fan of eating fish, cutting them up has never been my favorite thing so I stay away from it as much as possible.).

Around sunset, I was given a chance to fish and, despite my focus on seeing a green flash (we saw one the first night at sea), I took over on the fishing wench. As soon as my line hit bottom I had a fish on. Huntley, another crewmember and now good friend of mine, told me to wait a couple more minutes to see if any more fish would take any more of the 4 baited hooks (we fished with 5 hooks in total). I waited and it seemed as though I had at least another fish on, so I began to haul in the line. Anyone who has ever fished knows that most, if not all, of the excitement of fishing comes from the anticipation of the catch. The fishing line bridges the world above water to the world under water and, without singing the *Little Mermaid* song "Under the Sea," I think it is our fascination with the unknown that makes this bridge so exciting. In all my patience, I expected to have the largest and best catch. I am known for that sort of thing. And about 30 or 40 feet from the surface, I felt my line jerk up and down really hard several times. Had this occurred while my bait was on the bottom, I would have become very excited. However, I knew exactly what that meant. I hauled the line up to the surface and to my disbelief, the shark that took my fish also took my five-pound lead weight! Jeff, the ship's doctor and my fishing buddy, commented on the fact that some shark was going to be regretting its decision to swallow the weight. I laughed, but then thought about the countless Shark Week episodes I watched as a kid where they split open freshly caught sharks to examine their stomachs. Sharks will truly eat anything. Including nosy British girls who won't stop staring over my shoulder as I type (Amee is standing behind me reading every word I write, making sure that I do not write poorly of her anymore!)

No green flash at sunset tonight. But a beautiful "Miami Dolphin Sunset," as I call it, when the sky is full of the Miami Dolphin's shades of aqua and orange. We are watching Groundhog Day tonight, and I am already late! They say we are watching it because setting and hauling traps becomes one continuous blur of a day. I believe them after a day like today. Eight full, and much needed, hours of sleep will be immediately followed by a splash of water on my face, a trip to the head, and a brief breakfast before work...