

A Stunning Moment A Lifelong Seafarer Reimagines Her Watery World

By Poupette Smith

I never saw what brushed and jabbed me as I emerged from my snorkel off the deserted Bahamian cay. Something soft grazed my right leg, a gentle touch as if that something were licking, tasting, ensuring prey was alive — then a near-instantaneous penetration of sharpness deep into my ankle. Flesh acquiesced like brie giving way to blade. And in that instant when the brain struggles to analyze the nonsensical, I pictured a barracuda with pointy teeth darting — nay, an eel slithering from its hole to nip at the intruding limb. Unable to fathom how one creature could cause such contrary sensations, I remembered the pair of lion fish with their featherlike venomous spines swaying in the current nearby and thought of the fisherman's warning of toadfish.

We were in the remote Far Out Islands of the Bahamas. Of all the archipelagoes I've explored by sail, this place is dearest to my heart. In flamboyant juxtaposition to the gnarly shrub that ekes out its existence rooted to gray limestone cays, the color and clarity of Bahamian waters defy the imagination. So do the bird and fish species. And now I couldn't imagine which one of them could have stabbed me. Nor why. Was I being punished for spearfishing, for filling the larder with snapper only minutes ago? I don't like hunting fish, but eat we must, and vegetarian we are not. I supposed that whatever got me was teaching me how it feels to be speared.

As the venom took effect and the pain intensified to unendurable, my boyfriend, Leo, pondered the chances of my survival. It was a long hike and dinghy ride back to our VHF radio — and civilization.

I am not a naturalist by education but rather a nature hobbyist per se. The mere fact of living on a boat, anchored off remote islands or crossing oceans, exposes my porthole to myriad creatures, great and small. Yet like most swimmers, I'd never considered the power of some of these animals: I'd windsurfed over mantas in Bora Bora; swum with eagle rays and rowed alongside cownoses; hung inverted from the stern of our dinghy and watched a yellow eagle ray do a double take, dash up from the deep and follow within inches of my face. Now I wonder, was this wise?

A stingray jab, depending on barb size and severity and location of puncture, can cause hemorrhage; the venom — when released — stuns victims, inducing trauma if it penetrates arteries, veins or, in freakishly rare instances, vital organs such as the heart. It can sometimes lead to death by necrosis.

Later, I reflected on the ordeal and thought, was it purely accidental? Climbing ashore, it turns out, I'd stepped on a round ray buried in the sand. Should I have remembered admiring one there the day before and respected its territory?

I was stunned but survived the incident, which I chalk up as another interesting life experience. And I have come to view these graceful and curious creatures differently. Whereas I used to seek out rays, today I keep a respectful distance and ponder the folly of organized, environmentally suspect stingray — or shark — feeding tours. Yet rays, and particularly the phenomenon of their stinging apparatus, still beckon and intrigue me.

Thankfully I am now able to share a lesson learned: Heat applied to the wound, as hot as the victim can stand, breaks down the protein-based toxin and renders the pain bearable.

Pictures (top to bottom): Illustration © Stan Fellows; Courtesy Poupette Smith



The Author

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