

## **Question and Answer – What lies beneath? Professional diver comes up for air to tell us what life is like underwater**



**Kenn Feigelman**

KENN FEIGELMAN SPENDS HIS DAYS exploring the last frontier on planet Earth — the sea. Through his diving company, Deep/Quest 2 Expeditions, he's traveled the world with cameras to capture what's going on underwater. His footage is used in documentaries and travel videos, and he is back in Kingston after spending some of the summer in Mexico filming whale sharks. The Whig-Standard's Steve Ladurantaye caught up with him recently to talk about what's going on under the sea.

**Q You came back from your most recent trip the day Steve Irwin, the so-called Crocodile Hunter, was killed by a stingray. What's going through your head when you read that news?**

A: Stingrays are gentle; we saw them on this trip. We see them, we photograph them and pat them. They are very gentle, but we don't pick them up. We don't hold them close. We don't freak them out because they do have those big spines sticking out of their tails. They come in various sizes and when they get scared and want to take off, they whip their tails and go. It was a fluke, and he must have been very close.

**Q: Does it give you any pause, though? Do you reconsider what f you're doing for a living?**

A: He lived a life that was exciting. This time something happened and he's passed on. We don't harass animals. In the case of whale sharks, we didn't even want to touch them but we couldn't help ourselves. They are smooth like an inner tube. You can feel the muscles pulsating.

**Q: Have you ever been stung by a stingray? Bitten by a shark? Swallowed by a whale?**

A: The only scar on my body that is attributable to the sea is on my right leg, courtesy of a Portuguese Man O' War, a cousin of the jellyfish. I was snorkeling in Florida years and years ago and didn't see it, and swam through it and one of the tentacles broke off in my leg and stung me. Now I have a brown souvenir scar, but that's the only real injury.

**Q: How does one start a career as an underwater explorer?**

A: One usually starts in sport diving. I had decided quite early on in life that I wanted to be a biologist of some sort and, being an animal lover — and I had aquariums and all that — it just became natural that I would gravitate toward marine biology. Then I digressed a bit toward marine archeology and started doing work on shipwrecks.

**Q: What was the technology like when you started?**

A: When Deep/Quest was formed, it was to search for shipwrecks. It became natural we would start taking underwater pictures. It progressed to underwater filming. It was using everything as rudimentary as 8-mm film cameras inside homemade housings and not with the best of results. We graduated to professional equipment and special underwater housing for lights. Eventually, Sony came out with their first underwater housing especially for Betamax. To my knowledge, we were the first in Canada, if not North America to utilize this system. It was a marvelous system. It was bulky and it was heavy, but the results were stupendous and instantaneous. You saw the results right away; you could play it back underwater.

**Q: Is it deathly quiet underwater?**

A: You hear it down there. Although Capt. Cousteau ago called it the silent world, it is far from being a silent world. You hear your breathing and ambient noises. It's always clicks and groans and unknown noises. Your mind plays tricks on you, because it is never silent. Whale sharks are not silent; you hear swooshing from the whip of their tail.

**Q: You're not still shooting with film, are you?**

A: Today, it's digital. For me, it's a totally new animal and only this year have I started working with it under water. The camera sits in the palm of my hand. You are getting sound, but now it's in Dolby stereo, with this little bagel of a camera

**Q: Do you ever get creeped out as you're exploring? What sort of things are spooky?**

A: I was in the cenotes in February for the first time. These caves were formed tens of thousands of years ago when water tables were lower. This is all limestone, so not only do you have a giant hole in the ground, but miles and miles of tunnels and caves forming because it's all eroding and degraded over the centuries. You get these tunnels and they are very spooky. They can be really spooky and potentially Lethal. You can get lost; it's like a maze.

**Q: What do you do to prevent some thing bad from happening?**

A: We swam through one system almost two miles in. You want to make sure you have lots of air. We worked on the rule of thirds. A third of air to be consumed getting to the destination, a third to get out and a third extra for emergencies. There are all these giant stalactites hanging off the walls. You have to be careful because you don't want to break them, it'd be very embarrassing. It's not like a normal dive. You are overwhelmed by the views no matter how many times you've gone through. So you have ropes to follows.

**Q: You've been to places other people will never see. What sort of perspective does this give you?**

A: I've never thought of it that way. This is why we're there, it's why we exist. So the normal person can sit back and watch television or look at a magazine and through our lenses explore the situations we see.

**Q: What was the strangest thing about these caves?**

A: The cenotes are freshwater. Most of the ones known today are spring fed. It's like diving in a bathtub. It's crystal clear. You can see us, it's like we're suspended in space. One of them is called Angelita. It's like diving into a quarry. The top 80 feet is freshwater. However, when you get to the bottom, you then encounter a cloud. It's a 10-foot thick cloud at 80 feet, hydrogen sulphide gas from decomposing matter. It's rotten egg gas. You dive through this cloud. People just disappear; it's the spookiest darn thing. They're gone, they go 10 feet down and in cloudless

water again, but its salt water. The worst part is when you get out you stink; you smell like rotten eggs. We went crazy washing our gear. It was really cool.

**Q: The primary point of the trip was to film whale sharks. Why are there so many where the Gull of Mexico meets the Mayan Riviera?**

A: You get a great abundance of nutrients at that time of year. The animals, whale sharks and manna rays, are gorging themselves. They grow to 35 feet long. We were forewarned we'd be lucky to see some. But the gods were with us. We saw about 25 of them.

**Q: Do you just jump when you see a bunch of whale sharks?**

A: One just doesn't go off to be with whale sharks. The whole area is protected by the government of Mexico and they are very good at what they do. Whale watching has become a tourist situation. People go out on boats, wear wristbands but only for part of the day. The tourists that go out with guides have to be back by noon, so not to harass the animals. They are surface feeders eating plankton, so you can get in and snorkel. But you can't scuba dive. They don't want you following them. They are beautiful, gentle animals.



**Q: Do you know what you'll see before you leave, or are there surprises?**

A: We were caught off guard by how the water was full of jellyfish the size of the palm of your hand. There were tens of thousands of them, and the whale sharks were gorging themselves. They'd open their big maw of a mouth and they'd just get sucked in like a vacuum cleaner. No doubt they were ingesting them. I've never seen anything like this, never been in waters where there were just masses.

**Q: How long do you keep doing this?**

A: I'll be 60 in April. I'm proud that I'm in good enough health that I can still be in the water and film. We'll see what happens.