

BIMINI SHARK LAB- FELLOWSHIP REFLECTIONS

- Meghana Binraj

In the quiet corridors of memory, I often find myself revisiting the vivid tapestry of my journey as a shark researcher. As I sit down to reflect on my journey through the Minorities in Shark Sciences (MISS) fellowship, I am struck by the profound shift in perspective that I have experienced. My name is Meghana, and I am a first-generation graduate from a conservative Indian middle-class family. My path as a shark researcher began in the bustling fish markets of India, where I predominantly worked with thousands of dead sharks and rays, collecting fisheries dependent data and gaining insights into the dynamics of overharvesting, livelihood dependency, and the role these threatened species played in our ecosystems.

The MISS fellowship opened doors to a whole new realm of shark research with the internship opportunity at the Bimini Shark Lab, from participating in research activities in Florida Keys to sharing space with the curious beings in Bimini waters. This experience allowed me to witness firsthand the developments and advances in marine sciences and fishing practices in developed countries, contrasting them with the situations I had encountered back home.

One of the most remarkable moments during the fellowship was my first encounter with live sharks while assisting with shark work-ups in Florida keys. The bonnet hammerhead being the first to see. It was an eye-opening experience to observe these creatures in their natural environment and engage in practices that contribute to shark sciences as part of fisheries independent research. Additionally, setting fishing gears like drum lines and longlines as part of this research methodology provided me with a deeper understanding of the gears and techniques employed to study these animals alive.

Dr. Dean's lectures as part of Coastal Carolina University field course at BBSF, gave me an opportunity of a lifetime to sit through the shark sciences course, that exclusively was about shark biology, ecology, and conservation were invaluable in deepening my understanding of these creatures. The comprehensive overview ranged from fundamental concepts to advanced topics, helping me bridge gaps in my knowledge and answer questions that had intrigued me for a long time.

The transition from working with dead specimens to engaging with live animals emphasized the significance of a comprehensive approach to shark research. While the data collected from dead specimens had given me insights into the importance of conservation, fisheries independent data collection allowed me to see the bigger picture – how these creatures interact with their environment, the challenges they face, and the intricate balance within ecosystems.

Through this journey, I became acutely aware of the challenges faced by shark researchers, particularly from developing countries like India. Finding peers with similar backgrounds and accessing platforms for knowledge exchange, even the basic resources to learn about these species can be challenging. Moreover, securing a job that supports shark science research and provides adequate compensation is a struggle that many researchers face. The disparities in funding between countries further highlight the need for equity in research opportunities.

As I move forward, I am determined to make a positive impact on shark research and conservation in my homeland, India. I believe that my experiences and the insights gained from the MISS fellowship have helped advance my knowledge with the tools to address these challenges as a fresh start. By fostering a network of like-minded individuals, creating platforms for safe knowledge exchange, and advocating for equitable funding opportunities, we can work towards a more inclusive and balanced approach to shark research and conservation. From the fish markets of India to the research lab of Bimini, I have gained a deeper appreciation for the complexities of shark sciences, fisheries and conservation practices.

I'm profoundly appreciative for this remarkable fully-funded opportunity, poised to be a pivotal juncture in my journey as a shark scientist. The unwavering faith and backing motivate me to exceed expectations in my field, while also aspiring to open comparable avenues for fellow community members. The confidence ignites my resolve, and I eagerly embrace the voyage toward substantial growth. Heartfelt thanks for illuminating the path to a brighter future, and for fostering a platform that not only connects me with shark science researchers who share similar backgrounds, but also cultivates friendships.