

KILLER EELS!(?)

by Fred Garth



Bret Gilliam, Burt Jones & Stan Waterman at Waterman's Maine estate where the confused journey of classic language misunderstanding began

knowing that Stan always carries his video system and never misses the shot.

"No, some other divers on the boat told him the story right after they came up from the dive."

"And what about the turtle?"

"The morays ate it right down to the shell and skeleton within minutes," he related.

"Ate it? A thousand-pound turtle, the whole thing?" I asked dumbfounded.

"Nothing left but a few bones."

"No way!"

"That's what Stan said."

I could almost see him trying to intellectually fathom what might provoke a bunch of eels to attack such a beast without warning and then successfully kill it. Bret doesn't like the unexplained in his diving world and he's hung out on the edge of the envelope for over 30 years as a professional diver. If he was getting antsy about something, I damn well was going to pay attention.

"What do you think, Fred, have you ever heard of such behavior?" he asked.

A five-foot moray relaxes waiting for an unsuspecting leatherback turtle to approach



Bret Gilliam

Just a few days before leaving for Malpelo, Bret Gilliam, my publishing partner in this diving fantasy world, called me. I detected an unsettled quality in his voice as he recounted a disturbing conversation with the venerable Stan Waterman about Malpelo's freakish abundance of morays. He related, "Fred, I just got off the phone with Stan and he told me that a pack of the free-swimming morays attacked a leatherback turtle and completely devoured it while he was there on the *Sea Hunter* last week."

You have to know Bret. His exceptional confidence channels directly through his voice which is always strong, loud and unwavering. But not this time. Clearly, Stan's story had given him pause for thought. The attack of killer morays left him concerned on several levels. Firstly, he had to consider the safety of the 18 *Fathoms* guests we were taking on this trip. And from a more personal level, it's fair to say that the hulking ex-linebacker's physique and black divesuit bears more than a passing resemblance to a leatherback turtle.

"Did Stan witness the attack?" I asked,

"No, but I'm diving behind you when we get there just to be sure," I replied.

He dismissed me with a profane suggestion I could only have accomplished if I was a 14-year-old Soviet bloc gymnast, while promising to conduct further research into this new phenomenon. The leatherback incident weighed heavily on our minds for the next few days. As the trip neared we discussed the various flight details as well as the clearing of customs with a bunch of rebreathers, etc., but the conversation inevitably returned to the topic of the turtle carnage. I even had dreams about it. Nightmares, actually. Meanwhile Bret was working up contingency protocols in the event that the eels decided to get frisky. He'd decided that if anyone would know about this type of new threat behavior it would be Howard Hall or Al Giddings. But both his friends were off somewhere underwater themselves on film projects and his attempts to query them were falling futile.

I think his final plan largely consisted of hurling one of the smaller divers into the path of any eels that postured threateningly while beating a hasty retreat. One thing I was sure of, however, was that he would capture the sequence on film. In fact, he might actually have considered sacrificing a couple of skinny divers to be acceptable losses if the attack could be recorded for posterity. Anything for the advance of science and all that. I made a mental note to be sure I was on Miguel Sanchez's dive team. Miguel barely breaks 140 pounds with his weight belt on. I figured Gilliam would toss him first into any feeding frenzy.

At the San Jose airport, I was met by Mario Arroyo, the longtime dive supervisor on the *Sea Hunter* who has become a good friend over the years. I couldn't stand it any longer so I popped the question.

"Mario, ya gotta tell me about the morays eating the turtle."

He looked at me like I was insane.

"You know the leatherback. The morays eating the leatherback," I prompted helpfully.

He continued to stare at me like I was a sanitarium patient.

"What do you mean?" he finally muttered.

"Stan Waterman told Bret about it. I'm kind of freaking out."

"Told you what?"

"That the morays at Malpelo attacked a leatherback turtle and devoured the thing, bones and all," I whimpered.

A moment of awkward silence followed

while I waited for an explanation and watched his brain cells bounce around behind his eyeballs. I needed an answer and he didn't have it. I'd been losing sleep and we were soon departing to the land of hungry morays. My lips quivered. My palms were sweating. I needed a cold beer. Then a light went off somewhere deep in his cerebellum and Mario began to laugh.

"Not a leatherback," he said, kindly holding back the phrase "you stupid idiot gringo!"

While fearsome and capable of violent attacks on marine life, we were pleased to discover that turtles our size were not on the menu



Bret Gilliam

"It was a leather bass." (Intonation on the word "bass.") "The morays attacked a leather bass on Stan's trip. They ate it completely."

Oh, a leather bass is a grouper-like fish, I thought. Much smaller than a giant turtle. Now it all made sense and the weight lifted from me. I realized the language web we were tangled in. Here's a dive ship operated by two guys from Israel, with a captain from Sweden and dive guides from Costa Rica, Italy and Spain. It was a real-life Tower of Babel. Leatherback and leather bass sounded too much alike to Stan, who is now beyond 80 years old. I couldn't wait to tell Bret that he didn't have to wear a yellow divesuit and a cow bell.

In the end, we all had a good laugh at ourselves. But the images of morays chomping up a leatherback still haunt me from time to time. Just for fun, we took a vote and decided not to tell Stan. Until now. 🐠