

Shark Conservation Society

End of Year Newsletter 2011



Tiger shark (Galeocerdo cuvier) silhouette – photographed at the Aliwal Shoal in April 2009. Despite their popularity amongst divers, Tiger sharks are still regularly killed in the Natal Sharks Board's nets and also by illegal fisheries. Rob Allen ©

FROM THE EDITOR

Firstly I must apologise to all for the delay in getting this edition of the Newsletter published. With the Bahrain expedition having to be cancelled it seemed a real shame to have to not be able to report on an expedition so we thought it best to wait until our volunteers returned from the Scottish expedition and we could include the expedition report. To all the volunteers who made the long drive up to the Hebrides, I think we all owe you a toast of some fine single malt. Not many of us who become interested in sharks or shark conservation would envisage that one day our passion would take us to the cold, windy climes of northern Scotland. It's certainly a far cry from most of the so-called shark hotspots.

The cancellation of the April 2011 Bahrain expedition came as a massive blow to all of us who were meant to be making the now familiar flights to the Middle East. Although disappointing, having briefly visited the country at the time of the planned expedition, it immediately became apparent that it would have been wholly unworkable. Trying to conduct a 3 week expedition at the best of times is difficult enough, so with the added political unrest, it really was the right decision. I think credit must be given to the Bahraini authorities who did all they could to 'make it happen' right up until the last minute when the situation flared up again.

Although the cancellation of any expedition is deeply frustrating for all concerned, on a positive note it does highlight just how unique an organization SCS is. The Society has prided itself over the years on travelling to those areas where shark research is nowhere near the top of anyone's agenda. In this way we are able to make hugely significant breakthroughs in both research and legislative terms and all of you are the ones who help make this happen. It was great to see many familiar faces at the Dive Show a few weeks back and I look forward to seeing you many of you in the New Year. One last plea anyone off on sharky trips this Winter, do please get in touch at newsletter@sharkconsoc.com with your photos and articles.



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And on a lighter note...

A man is swimming in the sea when suddenly a gigantic whale comes to the surface, opens its mouth and swallows him whole.

The man arrives in the whale's enormous stomach and is surprised to see a great white shark in there with him.

He says to the shark, "Hey, you're a shark - why don't you bite your way out with your teeth?"

The shark smiles and says, "Bite my way out? But why would I do that when the meals here are so good?"

May I take this opportunity to thank each one of you for your continued support over the past 12 months and I wish you all the very best for the festive season and 2012.

Mark Boothman



Bull shark (Carcharhinus leucas) – taken at Beqa Lagoon, Fiji where the combined efforts of divers, villagers and scientists are responsible for the ongoing conservation of sharks – Rob Allen ©

FROM THE OFFICE

Richard writes:

For the second year running the Society had a major expedition disappointment, in 2010 the government of Abu Dhabi was unable to deliver the required logistics support for our expedition. However we secured an invitation from the government of Bahrain for an expedition this year then the "Arab Spring" sprung in many places and Bahrain was one of them. Serious civil unrest forced the Bahrainis to postpone this year's expedition, so it is now scheduled for April 2012.

Egypt was another country with whom we were in contact, and this was for an expedition based in Alexandria. Once again we became a casualty of the Arab spring as we have been told that there can be no progress on arranging an expedition until after the election of a new government.

Egypt, Bahrain and Turkey are still very much on our screen and in due time expeditions will go ahead in all places. Regular catches of juvenile White sharks



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in Edremit Bay have interested us for the last few years, and it would fit perfectly for SCS to investigate this. The final piece of news is that I have also started making contacts in the Azores and Lebanon for expeditions in both places in April 2013.

Mark and I visited Qatar and Bahrain in April, and in both countries we are still on track for new laws. In Bahrain we expect a similar law to the Qatari Green Sawfish Decree, and in Qatar there should be two important new developments:

- the closing to all fishing of the al Aliyah shark nursery for three months of the year.
- an annual 2/3 month ban on all fishing effort in the summer.

Thank you all for your support, we continue to achieve and make a difference, and without our Registered Supporters and Friends the Society couldn't work.

Jacqui writes:

We have just got back from the Hebrides which is bleak but a stunningly beautiful place. The September expedition was not a great success and Richard has covered this later in this newsletter.

We used to live in Beirut so the expedition to Lebanon is very exciting for me. I'm particularly looking forward to that expedition but I look forward to seeing faces new and old in the coming months.

Denise writes:

I am sorry I have sometimes been tardy re: chasing your RS renewals. Our research has shown that the majority of RS's intend to renew but either forget, or it's one of those "do tomorrow/do at the weekend" things that all too often never gets done.

Anyway that's why I chase renewals, AND two or three of you have even thanked me for doing so! Please keep renewing, the sharks need all the help we can give them.

SOCIETY NEWS

China (from Richard)

In early June I made my first visit to China thinking I was heading for the 'Kingdom of the damned', and having a real feeling of entering enemy territory. My lifelong passion has been wildlife in general and sharks in particular, and my perception was that most of the ills faced by wildlife on planet earth have their origins in China. The visit did not change my perception, but I came away convinced that there is a good chance that the Chinese themselves will do something about solving the problems – if by then its not too late and there's no wildlife left to conserve!

The primary reason for my visit was to present Shark Trust 'Shark Champion' awards to three Chinese men who have put forward proposals that a law be passed banning the import of shark fins into mainland China. I approached this proposition with the same scepticism that you are probably feeling as you read this! The secondary reason for the visit was to do research for my new film 'The Fin Trail', and start shooting initial footage.

The Shark Champions are utterly committed to finishing what they have started, and are genuinely convinced that the law they have proposed will come into being. They and others made me realise that the China of today and tomorrow are different places to the China of yesterday. Chinese young people are largely



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not interested in shark fin soup, and don't believe in killing wildlife for the sake of questionable remedies and ancient traditions. I came to believe that things are changing and will change faster – the sixty four thousand dollar question for sharks and other wildlife is will things change fast enough?

Jim Zhang, one of the Shark Champions told me that mainland China consumes 95% of the world's production of shark fins. If the proposed law comes into being fast enough, it will save the world's sharks at a stroke. History has shown time and again that if there is a demand then there will always be a supply, and legality in the West has never mattered – drugs, prohibition alcohol, human trafficking, illegal animal parts, etc., but stop 95% of the demand and that is the best way to also stop the supply. We must all continue our efforts and not rely on some possible Chinese solution in the future. However at the same time we must congratulate them on their initiative and encourage them to see it through.

Changes to the board

The Board announced that Nick Groom has decided to step down as a board member. Unfortunately, Nick found that other commitments have got in the way and that he was unable to dedicate enough time to the Society as much as he would have liked. Therefore, with regret, he concluded that his space would be best filled by someone with a little more time on their hands.

I'm sure I can extend my thanks to Nick from all of us in the Society.

Nick's place has been filled by Neil Britton. Neil is an old friend of Richard and Jacqui's, and I too have known him for a number of years. Living in Bude and being friends with Richard means that he is up to speed with shark conservation issues. However, you are unlikely to ever find Neil spending days on the deck of a boat waiting for a shark to rock up and he undoubtedly thinks that most of us who do are totally mad. However, it is that in itself which makes Neil a useful addition to the Board. Essentially he makes sure the other directors don't get so carried away with shark discussions that we lose sight of the obvious administrative hurdles that we need to overcome. I know I can count on your support in welcoming Neil to the Society and I know he is looking forward to meeting a lot of you in the months to come.



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Pelagic Thresher (Alopias pelagicus) – taken at Monad Shoal in the Philippines – Rob Allen ©

SCS UK Thresher Shark Database

At the last board meeting of the Society it was decided to start a database detailing thresher shark sightings, catches and encounters in UK waters. This is a timely and unique opportunity for the Society as no current such dataset exists for this species. The dataset will be established and thereafter updated and maintained by SCS as part of the Society's ongoing commitment to shark conservation based on fact, science, and effective action.

The database will include historic catch, encounter, and catch and release data. A data capture form will be published on the SCS website and will be available to all for download or online completion. The collated data will then be published on the website as appropriate.

Further information will be sent out to all SCS Registered Supporters and Friends in due course.

Save Bantamsklip

I know that Supporters and Friends have been receiving e-mails and reminders from the office regarding this campaign on a couple of occasions but it really cannot be stressed how important it is for all of you to sign this petition. Proposals to build a nuclear power station in South Africa, less than 10km from the Dyer Island Conservation Area have sent shockwaves across the shark community. This truly is a Mecca for White sharks and other species and these plans could result in severely jeopardising such a valuable marine environment.

SCS helped to initiate the Save Bantamsklip campaign but we really do need all of you to log on to their website at www.savebantamsklip.org and sign the petition. It literally takes 2 minutes to do and each signature is a critical step towards ensuring that this proposal does not go ahead.

In addition, please do post a link to their website on your twitter accounts, facebook pages, blogs etc.

The Fin Trail

Richard is currently in the process of putting together his new film, The Fin Trail, together with SCS Director, Simon Spear, and filmmaker Steve Bowles. The ambitious project will follow the paths of shark fins from source to soup and then concentrate on moves in China to bring into law a ban on fin imports. It aims to be the leading feature length documentary in this field and, should it live up to this expectation, will have a positive effect for shark conservation globally.



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Shark fins for sale in Hong Kong – Rob Allen ©

EXPEDITION UPDATES

Bahrain Expedition

I suspect that all SCS supporters are aware that the government of Bahrain cancelled the April 2011 SCS expedition due to the civil unrest in the country at the time. A Memorandum of Understanding has now been signed between SCS and the government of Bahrain re-scheduling the expedition for April 2012 with full Bahraini support as would have been the case this year.

The “Arab Spring” has a long way to go, and there’s no guarantee that Bahrain will be peaceful next April, however we have to hope that it will and we are planning accordingly. Therefore any SCS supporters who wish to apply for this expedition should do so now and priority will be given to those who were on the cancelled expeditions to Abu Dhabi (2010) and Bahrain (2011). The admin contribution will be £275 as usual and the payment/decision making timeframes are as follows:-

From now August 2011 - Applications received and places allocated, as usual there will be 12 volunteer places + Richard and Jacqui, a scientific advisor and film crew.

- December 2011 - £100 due from all those allocated places.
- January 2012 - £100 due
- February 2012 - Air tickets booked
- March 2012 - £75 due

The expedition start date will be April 7th (volunteers will arrive on April 6th), and the final day will be April 22nd, with April 23rd as a clear up day, and departure on April 24th. N.B. Easter Day is April 8th.

As mentioned already, earlier in April Richard and I made a short trip to Bahrain to confirm logistic arrangements for the expedition next year but primarily to try and progress the enacting of legislation in Bahrain to protect the Green Sawfish (*Pristis ziijron*). I am delighted to report that our meeting was successful and following meetings with officials from the Environment and Fisheries departments it was confirmed to us that steps would be made in the coming months to secure this important new law. We are still awaiting final confirmation that the law has been passed and we hope to be making an announcement shortly.



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Once passed, SCS will have made a major contribution to safeguarding this highly endangered animal in one of the last habitats it can be found on the planet. Rest assured though that once we have secured the Bahraini law, we will be working with other governments and organisations in the region to try and further extend this safe haven for the elusive Green Sawfish.



The first juvenile Whitecheek shark (Carcharhinus dussumieri) is measured, sexed and photographed before release close to Al-Aliyah Island, Qatar, April 2011

Qatar

As part of our visit to the Middle East in April, Richard and I spent the best part of a week in Qatar doing further follow-up work to the previous SCS expeditions.

The purpose of the visit was to attend various meetings to check on the progress of our legislative proposals and also to continue our research work at the Al-Aliyah nursery area, which was first located on the April 2009 SCS Expedition. Brigadier Ali Mennai, the Commander of the Qatar Coastguard, kindly offered us use of both boats and crews, for which we were very grateful.

We weren't blessed with perfect conditions during our short time in Qatar and unfortunately we were therefore limited in the amount of time we could stay at sea. However, despite only being able to work the relevant sites on one occasion we caught, processed and released 6 Whitecheek pups. All sharks caught were juveniles and it adds further weight to our previous findings and added ammunition to our proposal that this area should be subjected to a 3 month closure to commercial fishing activities every year.

Our meetings regarding the closure of the Al-Aliyah nursery ground have been progressing well. As the observant among you will note, we have been referring to this for some time now but rest-assured progress is being made. Mohammed al Mohannadi Said of the Qatar Fisheries Wealth Department, who is also an HLM, has been presenting his findings to the relevant committees and he assures us that we are inching closer toward our goal. Lobbying governments is rarely a speedy exercise but I hope to be reporting good news in the coming months.

In addition to our work at the nursery area, we continued to visit the fish markets wherever possible to add to the already detailed work we have done on shark landings in the country. Once again, we found that similar patterns emerged and we have passed our results on to our scientific advisor for the region, Alec Moore.



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Disappointingly one morning we came across one particular stallholder who was selling a crate full of fresh fins in direct contravention of Qatari law. The mood became fairly hostile as he, and others around him, realised who we were and what we were doing but I managed to get some photographs which we passed onto the relevant authorities. We have not been told whether the stallholder in question has been prosecuted or simply reprimanded but nevertheless the exercise in itself will hopefully ensure that those working in the fish markets in Qatar understand the law and abide by it.



Brigadier Ali Mennai is presented with his certificate of Honorary Life Membership by Richard – April 2011



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Scotland

The expedition report cannot be completed yet as data is still being gathered and processed. However what follows is an extract from the second edition of 'Sharks in British Seas' by Richard Peirce which will be published on December 12th. The expedition report itself should be on the website by early February.

SEPTEMBER 2011 – THE WESTERN ISLES

If one believes, as I do, that Great White sharks are occasional vagrant visitors to UK waters then it follows there are probably years when no sharks visit our seas, so to mount an expedition specifically to find one would be lunacy. I am not a loony, maybe I'm not totally sane, but I'm not nuts either, so when I've decided to work the areas where there have been credible sightings of Great Whites I did so on the basis of conducting general shark searches for all species rather than specific Great White hunts. In 2003 when I ran the expedition off Cornwall, the press daubed it a Great White hunt. So when we put together an expedition to work in the Western Isles I didn't expect to get away with it there either.

I am quite sure that if I had said to a media interviewer that I had proof positive of the landing on the Hebrides of a green headed alien from Mars and had come to investigate, the interviewer would still have said "Yes, Richard but what about the Great White shark"!

I always try to have some control of the press by releasing factual news rather than letting them find out that something is going on and then making up the rest. It hadn't worked in Cornwall in 2003 when media coverage went nuts and I completely lost control. For the September 2011 Hebrides expedition it worked. We put out press releases, the media used our information intelligently and for once the coverage, although extensive, stayed within the parameters we had set.

The nine credible and compelling possible sightings of Great Whites in UK waters are in two clusters which are off Cornwall and Scotland's west coast. A team of ten volunteers including a videographer and a scientific advisor spent between September 16th and October 1st based at Lochmaddy on North Uist with the intention of carrying out the first ever shark survey in that area. The Monach Islands are home to northern Europe's largest seal colony of Grey seals which start pupping in late September/early October. Where there is prey there are usually predators so the Monachs at the beginning of the pupping season was a logical place to look for large sharks. This tiny group of islands lies seven miles west of North Uist and inside St. Kilda which is the most westerly of the Outer Hebrides.

The timing of these expeditions often has to be a compromise between the availability of volunteers (school/uni holidays) and local factors, such as the likely weather and seal pupping; together with specific information such as past sightings of species of interest. The timing of this expedition was just such a compromise and I always recognised that the weather was our greatest threat, and the one factor totally beyond our control.

The scientific aims of the expedition were to gather meteorological, oceanic, and other environmental data from the areas around the Monach Islands, through the Sound of Harris and out into the Little Minch and to conduct a general shark search/survey of the area. Conditions could then be compared to other places in the world where there are known Great White shark populations and if conditions were, as suspected proven to be identical, then the question of why there isn't a known Great White shark population, even seasonal, could be addressed. Great White sharks may never have been plentiful in the north Atlantic and there is no reliable baseline data as to abundance, but they are recorded as having always been present. In the days of whaling activity Great White sharks were recorded around the Azores, there is a known population on the eastern coast of the United States, the nearest recorded (proven) Great White shark occurrence to our shores was a female caught off La Rochelle in 19??, and I am convinced there is a high probability that some of the encounters I have listed as credible were indeed Great White sharks.

So they are there, we have always known they were there, and in the days before they were so severely depleted why didn't they discover the ideal



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habitats that exists in some places in the British Isles, and establish resident or seasonal populations? Or did they? Two hundred years ago prior to population depletion would a small number of Great White sharks around the Monach Islands during the pupping season even have been noticed? Who was there to notice, the Hebrideans would not have been recreational water users, and this was the days before industrial fishing? The population in the islands in 1901 was only 46,000, which however was nearly double today's 26,000, so I believe that it is perfectly logical to assume the presence of the sharks could have gone unnoticed.

I raised this point with lifelong local fisherman Willie Stewart. I asked whether large marine predators preying on seal pups from October would have been sure to be noticed. He replied that once the creels had been collected in during October no-one really went there so there was no-one to see anything!

Prior to analysing the data gathered on the expedition Daniel Moore, our scientific advisor, said that it looked as if the general environmental, meteorological and oceanic conditions in the Hebrides and in South Africa, and California are very similar. The full analysis of the data will not be completed until after this book is published, but the initial view confirms the enigma of why Great White sharks are not found in British waters.

Both Scottish TV and the BBC wanted to come aboard our vessel and film the expedition. This gives small non-profit societies like the Shark Conservation Society (SCS) a problem in that if a Great White shark, a Greenland shark, or anything else unusual turned up and provided the opportunity to acquire unique footage, then we (SCS) would want to shoot it ourselves. The value of the first footage in UK waters of a Great White or Greenland shark could be thousands of pounds and if such footage were acquired on an SCS expedition by a broadcaster (BBC/ITV) not only does SCS lose the chance to sell it to them, but we wouldn't own the copyright for future sales.

The Porbeagle footage shot in 2007 has earned several hundred pounds for SCS, and so obviously these chances have to be kept in-house to avoid shooting ourselves in both feet. My terms to Scottish TV and the BBC therefore were that in return for a small donation to the Society they could come aboard for a day and film what they liked, but if anything really unusual turned up they would leave us to film it, and would then have to buy the footage from us. Reasonable terms you would think? Wrong, keen though they both were neither could agree to these terms. The incredible selfish arrogance of these large corporations beggars belief. Our volunteers were each paying around £1000 to come on the expedition, and the BBC and Scottish TV not only expected to be able to come aboard for nothing, they then wanted to have the right to rip off a non-profit conservation society! I wonder what colour the sky is in their worlds – pink with purple spots perhaps! I guess the reason is that in general people are so desperate to get their faces on TV or their names in print that they throw all normal considerations out of the window.



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FUTURE EXEDITIONS

These are the following expeditions that the Society has in the pipeline:

April 2012	Bahrain
September 2012	Blue shark tagging in the Azores
April 2013	Edremit Bay (Turkey) or Lebanon
Sept/Oct 2013	Alexandria, Egypt

As always, these are subject to change. With continuing unrest in the Arab region, volunteers interested in the Bahrain expedition are strongly advised to book refundable/changeable flights. It is always disappointing if an expedition

has to be cancelled or postponed and rest-assured that we never want to have to make those decisions. However, as Bahrain in April of this year showed, there are many circumstances out of our control, which unfortunately is the nature of the work.

If any Supporter would like to be put on the 'interested list' for next years' expeditions please do let the office know as soon as possible. Interest is always very positive so it is strongly advisable to get your name down early.



Basking shark (Cetorhinus maximus) – screen grab taken from movie footage shot by Simon Spear during his recent trip to Scotland. Simon Spear ©

Supporters' travels

This issue SCS Director, Simon Spear, writes of his recent rip to Scotland. It just goes to show that you don't have go to far flung corners of the planet to get the opportunity for some incredible shark encounters.

"Apparently I had seen hundreds of Basking sharks – the trouble was that I just didn't remember it! Growing up with a boat obsessed grandfather living in Cornwall I had spent countless long summer days out with him in his boat spotting sharks. I do have the odd recollection from that time, but, whilst I was still too young to fully remember, my grandparents moved away to sunnier climes. It would be another 20 years before I would return to Cornwall in search of sharks.

Unfortunately though as I became a shark-obsessed adult my encounters with Basking sharks were nothing like they had been with my grandfather. I spent parts of the next 10 years looking for Basking sharks but generally with very little success. Sure I spotted the odd fin here or a snatched glance there, but never much more than that. I lost count of the number of times I heard the dreaded words that any wildlife addict fears, "you really should have been here last week/month/year". I truly had begun to believe that the god of the Basking shark spotters was having a right old giggle at my expense.

However, the one area which seemed to be more successful than most was the Hebrides. I had spotted a number of sharks in that area while filming Sharks in British Seas and, although these sightings were never in ideal conditions, it was clear that this area off the west coast of Scotland had massive potential. So, when I heard of a weeklong charter dedicated to searching for Baskers I needed very little persuasion to sign up.

We were to be based out of Tobermory on the Isle of Muss for the duration of our stay, but the intention was to follow the sharks and camp out on beaches near to wherever they had taken us that day. This would avoid the need for spending hours travelling and would hopefully result in us spending more time with the sharks once we had found them.



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The first day conditions were about as close to perfect for spotting Basking sharks as you could hope for. The wind was about 4 knots, the sea was flat calm and there was bright sunshine. However, that was all the luck we had and in the whole day we didn't see a single shark. As we set up camp that night, I had that growing sense of dread gnawing at my stomach, a sense that unfortunately I was only too familiar with.

The next day our luck started to change and after a few hours of searching we finally started to run into some sharks feeding at the surface. First there was 1, 2, 3, then 5, 10 and then about 20 were in sight. At one point we counted 41 dorsal fins visible at the surface, which, as most people agree, it was likely to be an aggregation of around 100 individuals.

Although there was a lot of plankton in the water, visibility was surprisingly clear and over the next 4 hours I experienced what could only be described as Basking shark nirvana. One shark after another continually passing within a metre or so of my camera lens and at times it was like a train 3 or 4 sharks long, seemingly changing direction towards me. I thought that my inability to move in my cumbersome dry suit would mean that I risked ending up inside one of their cavernous mouths but, even when they passed within just a few inches, I managed to avoid touching them (or they did me depending on who's perspective you take!)

As the week went on the weather progressively deteriorated but we seemed to be treated to one wildlife encounter after another. Basking sharks, huge pods of common dolphins, an array of seabirds and even eagles. This is truly a remarkable part of the British Isles.

Living in Britain it is sometimes easy to forget just how lucky we are to have Basking sharks inhabiting local waters. They are the epitome of the word 'mega fauna' and, although they are found in temperate seas all over the world, Britain has to be about the best place to see one of these gentle giants. Some scientists and conservationists seem to suggest that Basking shark numbers are starting to recover from the days before their hunting was banned in British waters. I sincerely hope they're right. With responsibly run ecotourism let's hope that many others can experience this most impressive shark up close, hopefully without having to endure a decade long quest before they do.



Basking shark (Cetorhinus maximus) – screen grab taken from movie footage shot by Simon Spear during his recent trip to Scotland. Simon Spear ©



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Shark Shop

As usual, please do think about our shop when trying to choose all those stocking fillers. Please visit the website for more details and I would ask that you order soon to avoid disappointment.

Please also keep your eye out next year for new additions to the range. If anyone has any ideas of items that they would like to see in the shop then please feel free to drop me a line at newsletter@sharkconsoc.com.

Thank you for taking the time to read this edition of the Newsletter and particular thanks to all those who have contributed in some way. Let's hope that 2012 brings good expeditions, lots of sharks, flat seas and, most importantly, better protection for sharks worldwide.

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