

Migration of blacktip sharks draws international film crews

Kimberly Miller
Palm Beach Post
USA Today Network

The unique [migration of blacktip sharks](#) along Florida's southeast coast attracted four international film crews this season, an abundance of attention that is growing as the area becomes a popular destination for nature documentaries, according to the Palm Beach County Film and Television Commission.

Christy Andreoni, director of operations and production for the commission, said easy [access to experts](#) at Florida Atlantic University, [Gumbo Limbo Nature Center](#) and the [Loggerhead Marinelife Center](#) adds to the appeal of Palm Beach County for nature films.

\$6,000 sensors: [Will keep daily diaries of blacktip sharks off Palm Beach coast](#)

She issued more than a dozen official film permits to two production companies based in the United Kingdom for blacktip shark-related documentaries in February. Two other production groups from the U.K. worked from boats offshore, which only required notifications to the U.S. Coast Guard and FAA, Andreoni said.

“Local scientists are becoming really well-known throughout the world for their efforts to protect marine life, and the sharks coming along our coastline is a huge draw,” Andreoni said. “There might be one or two companies that film the sharks or the mullet run in the fall, but to have four at once is unusual.”

In addition [to the sharks](#) and the mullet run – where dense schools of the bait fish head south for the winter – Andreoni said film crews have also sought video of the goliath grouper and sea turtle nesting.



Permits issued this season include filming from Phil Foster Park and Ocean Reef Park in Riviera Beach, and from Boca Raton's South Beach Park and Spanish River Park.

[**VIDEO: Hammerheads slink close to Palm Beach County shore, and there's a reason for that**](#)

All those sharks: [Heading our way? Many aren't coming...and why that's a concern](#)

“One of the advantages of filming here is the accessibility,” said FAU shark researcher Stephen Kajiura, who worked with three production companies this season. “You are not in the Amazon rainforest living in a tent, you’re staying in a hotel on Palm Beach.”

He said interest in the blacktip shark migration, which peaks in February, has been building over the years, possibly because of a growing social media influence and an increased use of drones to get aerial images of the sharks hugging the coastline.

The coast of Palm Beach County and the Gulf Stream current work as a funnel to bring the sharks together and closer to shore in their trek north as winter turns to spring and they seek ideal water temperatures.

Kajiura said he’s been trying for years to get a company interested in doing a full-length documentary on FAU’s work with the blacktips. He got it this year with a company based in Bristol, England, that is filming for National Geographic. When word spread through

the tight-knit film industry about the partnership, another company contacted Kajiura, hoping to also work with him.



Cinematographer Bertie Gregory, left, on assignment for the BBC, and wildlife photographer Michael Patrick O'Neill of Palm Beach Gardens work the annual mullet run from Singer Island in September 2019. GREG LOVETT/PALM BEACH POST

“You get all types of productions,” Kajiura said. “The high-end Blue Planet type of productions where they are just focused on the animals themselves. Then there’s the other ones that are more human-focused, where they are documenting what the scientists are doing.”

There were so many people filming the blacktips this year, Kajiura said, that when he was on a boat with one company, he looked up to see a drone flying overhead from another company.



“They are all starving for content, so once you get something that gets attention, more people get interested,” he said.

The COVID-19 pandemic put a stop to many local film projects last year.

Production revenue for Palm Beach County as measured by the film commission was \$171 million in 2020, a drop of 28% from 2019. The number of permits issued in 2020 was 265, a decline of 18% from the previous year.

The number of production days was down 22% in 2020 from 2019.



Although the commission doesn't break out the types of production by subject matter, Andreoni said nature films did better at maintaining their production schedule because fewer people are typically needed with the use of stationary underwater cameras and drones.

But filming wild animals poses unique challenges, said Kari Rosenberg, co-founder and head of production for the [West Palm Beach-based ANGARI Foundation](#).

She used drones and block cameras — cameras attached to concrete blocks that are dropped in the water — for some of her productions.

“With the block cams, you drop them and leave for a couple hours and are just hopeful you get something,” she said. “It’s kind of spontaneous, and you have to be on your toes because it can be unpredictable. Cameras are always ready to roll.”