

SIREN *of the* SEA

CONSERVATIONIST JULIE RIFFE
MAKES THE OCEAN HER
SECOND HOME.

BY TERENCE LOOSE

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ore than 400 miles off the coast of mainland Mexico, Julie Riffe hovered 30 feet deep in the cobalt blue waters off uninhabited Clarion Island, her speargun trained on a huge wahoo prowling the waters a dozen yards away. She fought the urge to breathe or dart to the surface, instead staying calm, motionless and waiting for the fish to swim within range. Finally, wondering if Julie was something to eat, the predator moved toward her and she fired. Her spear pierced the fish just behind the gill plate, and she watched it dive for the bottom, taking with it her float line, attached on one end to the spear and on the other to a buoy on the surface.

Then she saw them: a half dozen or more six- to 10-foot sharks. They swarmed in and attacked her fish with a fury and within seconds it was gone. But that was the least of her worries now, because once the fish was gone, Julie was the next thing on the menu.

The sharks bolted straight for her. Julie kicked and butted the sharks away with her now spearless gun. On the surface, many yards away, her boat driver saw the roiling fight.

"He thought I was getting attacked, so he raced over and pulled me out of the water," says Julie. "It was definitely the worst shark situation I've been in."

For most, that might be an experience that drives them away from the sea, or at least diving in the open ocean and spearing big predators. But not Julie. "I've kicked, elbowed and punched plenty of sharks away," she says. "But I've never had to pull the trigger on a shark."

Sharks, it seems, are just part of the lifestyle she signed up for when deciding to follow in the wake of her father, the legendary San Clemente waterman and spearfisherman Jay Riffe. Today, Julie helps run the family business, Riffe International, a leading maker of spearfishing equipment, an industry so male-dominated it makes tangling with sharks seem tame.

But even as a young girl growing up in Laguna Beach and San Clemente, she was never afraid to mix it up with the boys. "My dad knew I was the gutsy one out of my sister Jill and me. I was always the tomboy, so he would paddle me out at T-street and push me into waves," she says. That was when she was in first grade.

For sportfishing aficionados, Orange County-based Riffe International has manufactured underwater hunting equipment since 1979. The family-owned company is now led by Julie Riffe, a second-generation award-winning spearfisher.



Riffe's diving team consists of experts like Kimi Werner (pictured) who started spearfishing at the age of 4. BELOW Julie Riffe with her father, Jay, show off their big catch.

Soon enough, she was following her dad around the kelp paddies with a pole spear. "He taught me about currents, types of fish, tides, just how to be better in the ocean," she says.

And it was a good thing she liked the ocean because in the Riffe family visiting the ocean was as common as going to the grocery store. On weekends and during summers they would take family boat trips to Catalina and the historic Long Beach Neptunes Spearfishing Tournaments were considered family outings.

Finally, when Julie was 12, she found a new speargun, handmade by her father, under the Christmas tree. "I didn't have a lot of strength, but I was super enthusiastic. So at first, he would have to load the gun for me but I would pull the trigger. Of course, the first few times I closed my eyes," she laughs.

She soon got the hang of it, however, and began shooting perch and other smaller fish. Her father taught her how to clean and cook her catch, along with setting rules that would ensure she never killed what she couldn't eat.

As she became more proficient under the water, she also became more skilled atop of it. She joined the surf team at school and became a regular at Salt Creek, although gaining respect took a while. She says that in that era, the late '80s and early '90s, women were less than welcome in the lineup. They'd cut her off, drop in on her, and generally give her zero respect. But she kept coming back and, eventually, she climbed the pecking order.

In the spearfishing world it was often more difficult. Her family heritage, which should have been her greatest asset – and likely would have been if

she were a Jack instead of Julie – became her biggest hurdle.

"People would say, 'Oh, her father shoots the fish and she just poses with them.' or that may father 'puts me on' the fish. I've heard it all," she says.

The truth is her father taught her everything he knew about spearfishing – mainly because he had to. From the time Julie was young right through high school, Riffe International was not the industry leader it is today. It was a garage start-up built on pure necessity and passion. Jay Riffe made his own spearguns from early on and became so skilled at crafting true-shooting teak guns that friends began placing orders. So, after work and dinner with the family, Riffe would retire to the garage to make spearguns for friends, who would often drop by with beers and fish tales. Julie would tag along and soak it all in. And it wasn't long before she was put to work.

"My dad would ask me to help, so I'd tie powerbands or drill the holes in the sharkfin tabs, or polish everything up. It was how I earned my allowance," she says. "I was in heaven."

But business got a little too heavenly and in 1993 complaints from neighbors over the machine noise forced Jay to move his operation to an



industrial space in San Clemente. The family also went to their first spearfishing convention in San Francisco and came home with a 500 gun order – and no way to fill it. Employees were hired and trained, guns were made, and before the Riffes knew it, a true business was established.

But as Julie graduated high school, she wasn't "all-in" as far as spearfishing was concerned. She was torn between surfing, snowboarding and following in her father's footsteps. So she worked managing a few restaurants and pursuing all three sports for a few years, until 1996, when she travelled to Mexico for a Long Beach Neptunes bluewater tournament. There, she speared a 38-pound white sea bass, a notoriously elusive fish.

"That was my biggest fish yet and it changed everything," she says. "I came home and told my dad this is what I wanted to devote my life to." Her dad was thrilled. The business was starting to take off and he knew it would benefit from Julie's lifelong experience and enthusiasm.

But it wasn't all smooth water from there.

A few years later, at the 1998 National Spearfishing Championships in Malibu, Julie got "Largest Fish" and, as she was leaving the tournament, a group of environmental activists surrounded her, shouting slurs and peppering her with accusations of being an indiscriminate killer.

Julie says she knew that they were wrong, that spearfishing is actually the most selective and least impactful way to fish. "Unlike longliners, trawlers, and nets, we don't have huge amounts of bycatch. Also, with commercial fishing there are transportation pollution concerns. We believe in fish for the future," Julie says. In other words, she and the activists were, in many ways, on the same side.

Unfortunately, she wasn't prepared to articulate this to a group of seemingly militant activists. So instead she found herself venturing further from land in the coming years, staying away from tournaments and the reefs and pursuing bigger fish, such as grouper, wahoo, mahi, and tuna, in the open ocean.

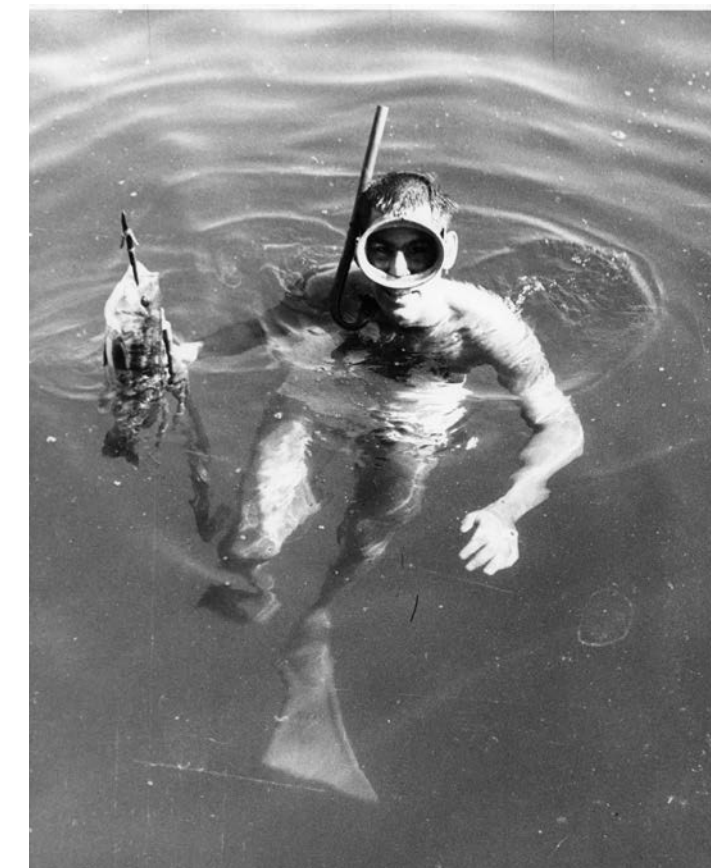
That required a lot of travelling, something she wholeheartedly embraced. She bounced around the fish-filled parts of the world, like Mexico, Costa Rica, Fiji, Australia, Hawaii, and many uninhabited islands that most maps don't bother naming.

The trips were adventurous and wonderful, but usually anything but first-class – big fish tend to stay clear of five-star resorts. Take the first trip she took to a small island off the coast of Panama. They showered in freshwater runoff and the packing list included dive gear, toothpaste, toothbrush and "stuff to go with fish." Just what did that mean? "A bottle of soy sauce, onions, Ritz crackers, and a bottle of rum," she says. Oh yeah, her fellow spearfisherman told her, "and make sure you bring some Nyquil to help you sleep – at night the land crabs are unbearable."

She survived the land crabs, ate a lot of fish, and the trip only stoked her fire for more. Somewhere along the way she also found time to start a family and today has two young girls. She still dives, surfs and snowboards, but admits to slowing down a little – two ACL surgeries will do that to a mom.

But she says she's finally getting back into the swing of things. Besides, it turns out that tangling with big sharks is really great training for temper tantrums and parent teacher conferences. ●

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Just like dad. Julie Riffe (above) shows off her large catch. The expert fisher woman learned all about the briny deep from her father.