

FOR ONE FESTIVAL VENDOR

Diving is a way of life

By **BRYAN ROBERTS**
GUEST COLUMNIST

The arrival of April brought the 25th annual Venice Shark's Tooth Festival. This event, with its lively mix of bands and eclectic vendors, was as fun as ever.

Cold beer and tasty "fair food" helped to round out the experience, although one of the desserts arguably should have come with a pair of defibrillator paddles. For fossil hunters, however, the real action was in the three large tents devoted to the folks selling the items from which the festival takes its name.

To be sure, the fossil dealers on hand offered a selection of specimens far more expansive than just shark's teeth. Festival goers could purchase fossil fish from Wyoming, ammonites from Russia, trilobites from Morocco, and all manner of vertebrate and invertebrate fossils from Florida's myriad rivers and streams. But still, you couldn't ignore the shark teeth.

Dealers from not only Florida, but also the Carolinas, had case after case of large, impressive teeth, mostly from the giant prehistoric shark Megalodon. This beast, which — luckily for us — died out millions of years ago, once prowled the waters of Florida and the Southeastern U.S. Since sharks lack an actual skeleton, fossil Megalodon remains largely consist of vertebrae and, of course, those impressive teeth. With estimated lengths of 50-60 feet and a mouth more than six feet wide, Megalodon left behind some very impressive choppers indeed.

Locally, the Megalodon teeth can be found both onshore and offshore, with some of the largest currently being found by divers just off the beaches of Manasota Key. Some of the most productive beds, however, are in the coastal South Carolina and Georgia areas. The teeth are highly prized by collectors and have allowed at least one

dealer who was at the Shark's Tooth Festival, Bill Eberlein, to make it a full-time job.

The owner of MegaTeeth Fossils, Eberlein didn't start out as a professional fossil hunter. With degrees in accounting and information technology, Eberlein took up diving originally as a hobby. After doing his first dive for shark teeth off of Hilton Head in the 1990s he got the fossil hunting bug in a big way and, in his own words, "was hooked ever since."

Most days of the year Eberlein and his boat captain partner, Gene Ashley, prowl the creeks and rivers of Liberty County, Georgia. Working depths usually between 40 and 60 feet, Eberlein practices what is referred to as "black water diving." Due to the large amount of sediment in the water, visibility — even with a powerful light — is poor. This means primarily feeling around the bottom for fossils with his hands, with no idea as to what might be sharing his underwater space.

While Eberlein has found mastodon and mammoth teeth, the ultimate prize is always the Megalodon tooth. The largest specimen Eberlein has ever found measures 6.94 inches, just shy of the elusive seven-inch mark (shark teeth are measured on a diagonal from the point to the highest corner of the root.) While condition and color are always important, shark tooth values are predicated in large measure on size. And, with each inch as a benchmark, seven inches is considered something of a Holy Grail among collectors. Teeth larger than six inches can sell for thousands of dollars and a tooth exceeding seven inches would likely get \$10,000 or more.

Black-water diving in Georgia and the Carolinas is not without significant risks. Currents can be treacherous, and Eberlein was once carried 6 miles out into the Atlantic Ocean before being rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard.

With no visibility, it is impossible to tell what might be swimming next



SUN PHOTOS BY BRYAN ROBERTS

Bill Eberlein, left, discusses a Megalodon tooth with Miami collector Jeff Alianiello.



Manasota Fossil Club members Debbie Morrison, right, and her sister Renee found plenty of treasures to consider at the Venice Shark's Tooth Festival.

to you. As Eberlein told the Manasota Fossil Club in a talk last year, he was once spun around twice by something that grabbed one of his swim fins. "I came up after that," he admits.

Such diving can even be fatal. Last year, renowned fossil hunter Vito Bertucci drowned while diving for shark's teeth in Georgia's Ogeechee River.

Still, Eberlein feels that the rewards far outstrip the risks. He has collector clients all over the world and makes a living doing something that many

people only dream about. Some fossils he keeps for his personal collection, most he sells, and others he donates to charitable causes. Assisted at the fossil shows by his wife Dodie, Eberlein tells me that he is already looking forward to next year's shows in Florida. You probably won't ever see his 6.94-inch tooth, though. That tooth, described as "the find of a lifetime," is kept in a safe deposit box and Eberlein doesn't intend to sell it. Unless, perhaps, that seven-inch tooth finally comes along.

Register now for 2017 youth summer camps

By **SUSAN ERWIN**
CORRESPONDENT

Sarasota County Parks and Recreation is offering 10 weeks of summer fun for children entering grades 1-12. These camps provide a variety of safe and enjoyable summer recreation opportunities.

Day camp is designed for children entering grades 1-5 in North County and 1-6 in South County and includes weekly themes, multiple weekly field trips, physical activity and other activities related to creative arts, science and nature, safety and wellness and character development. The camps run from June through August.

New camps this year include archery, beach volleyball and Bricks 4 Kids, which offers youngsters the opportunity to experience cutting edge technology with the introduction of LEGO Mindstorm EV3 Robotics. There also is a new, full-day camp available this year at Woodmere Park in Venice. And a nature camp is another new option this year.

Sarasota Parks and Recreation supervisor Diana Finnegan said more than 2,800 kids registered for camps last year.

Registration opened this year on March 27.

"The mini camps sold out on the first day of registration — more than 900 kids were registered within the first 24

hours," Finnegan said.

The staff to camper ratio is one counselor for every 15 kids.

"On any given day we have 800 kids in the various camps," Finnegan said.

If your child interested in learning how to create delicious and nutritious meals, sign him or her up for chef camp, a course that teaches cooking techniques from the local chefs at Mattison's Forty-One restaurant in Sarasota.

Or if your kids want to be in the water this summer, there are several sailing, swimming and rowing camps and your child can even train to be a lifeguard. Sign up for junior lifeguard camp and spend a week with professional lifeguards learning the fundamentals of lifeguarding.

"I took the junior lifeguard camp when I was 15 and it helped me get a job," said Zoe England, a lifeguard at the SKY Family YMCA in Venice. "That experience definitely taught me the skills I needed to pass the certification process."

Specialty camps also are available, including adventure camps and therapeutic camp, as well as counselor-in-training programs.

The camp fees vary and include all field trips and activities. A camp T-shirt is provided with each session enrollment.

The current registration total is 2,178,

Finnegan said recently.

"We still have availability and financial assistance available for our weekly day camps offered at Woodmere Park in Venice and Laurel Park in Laurel," she said.

Parents can register online at SCGov.net/parks. Online registration may be paid in full or in two installments. Financial assistance is also available. Contact the parks and recreation staff at 941-861-5000 for more information.

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Now is also the time to sign up for Venice and Englewood YMCA summer camp programs. Day camp can offer all of the benefits of traditional camp — new experiences, skill-building, a sense of community and lasting friendships — while allowing campers to return home each afternoon. YMCA camps include a free healthy lunch and snacks daily. There are camps available for kids in kindergarten through eighth grade. Early registration is encouraged. Scholarships are available for those who qualify. Visit SWFLymca.org/programs/summer-camp-venice to view the full brochure and registration forms.

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Several churches in town will once again be hosting Vacation Bible Schools in July and August. Contact churches directly for details on times and dates.



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY SARASOTA COUNTY GOVERNMENT

Girls at a Sarasota County summer camp in Laurel in 2014.



New camps this year include archery, beach volleyball and Bricks 4 Kids.