

## **Rethink the Shark**

Throughout recorded history man has feared sharks. We have experienced sufficient attacks on bathers, surfers, divers and people stranded at sea to consider them "monstrous beasts" that should be killed at every opportunity. To this day, the vast majority of people still believe that the only "good shark" is a "dead shark".

We will not easily overcome our fear of sharks and we will not easily change the perceptions of sharks as "man eaters", but we have reached a point in our history where we must conserve them for the future well-being of the oceans. Throughout the world shark populations are declining rapidly and the balance of nature is fast becoming unbalanced. Our task, as a public aquarium promoting conservation of our oceans, is to inform our visitors of the role of sharks in the oceans and the importance of the larger species as apex predators. We promote a balanced perspective regarding sharks and shark attacks and, in so doing, attempt to change the attitudes of those of us who enter the oceans, either for recreation or as a livelihood. This is, however, a rather daunting task, for how do we promote the conservation of animals that are considered "man eaters" and continue to attack us on occasion?

Our attempts to change attitudes focus on keeping things in perspective and reducing the hysteria and "outcries of rage and revenge" each time an attack occurs. Shark attacks are horrific to us because they appear to be savage and malicious. Yet, in order to survive, these animals must attack prey in a similar fashion every day of their lives. It is completely natural for them to do so and there is nothing sinister or malicious about it. Our message to anyone entering the sea, for whatever purpose is, therefore, that we should accept that we are entering a wilderness area in which sharks reign supreme. To us, there is no difference to taking a walk in the Kruger Park. Would it be realistic never to expect attacks by lions? No, there is good reason that we stay in the protection of our cars when we enter a game park!

We should, in fact, be extremely grateful that we are not generally considered prey by sharks. Consider the growing number of people entering our waters each day and the number of sharks in close proximity to us. If we formed part of their natural diet we should be experiencing many attacks. Yet, along the entire South African coast (over 2,000km) over the last four decades there has been, on average, only one serious injury every year and only one fatality every 2.3 years. Clearly, we cannot consider ourselves prime targets! The recent spate of attacks in False Bay is of great concern to us yet, again, if we look at the facts we see that there has not been a single attack on a bather in shallow water (the surf zone) in living memory. All the attacks have been in deeper water. As deep water is the territory of the Great White shark and we know that there is generally a good number of these sharks in the Bay, we should expect encounters of this nature. Those of us who wish to swim, paddle or surf in deep water must

accept the fact that we are increasing the likelihood of an encounter with one of the oceans' top predators. In deep water we are "walking with lions". It's a personal choice.

There is an element of risk in all that we do in life but, with ever increasing knowledge we are able to reduce many of these risks. Recordings of shark attacks over many, many years from all the regions of the world are now showing clearly where and when the chances of attack are increased. Fortunately for us and for our tourism industry, these statistics show that swimming in the surf in False Bay (and on all our bathing beaches for that matter) remains safer than the simple acts of crossing a road or driving a car!

In line with our attempts to put things into perspective the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi, in partnership with the production company Groundglass, have recently produced three outstanding advertisements. Comparing shark attacks to deaths caused by the use of everyday appliances and toys and cleverly interweaving the hysteria portrayed in films such as "Jaws", they show that the chance of falling prey to a shark attack is miniscule in comparison to deaths caused by defective toasters, people falling off chairs and, believe it or not, flying kites! Their message is neither frivolous nor disrespectful. It is simply that we need to "Rethink The Shark".

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