

Media Darlings

Sharks are a multi-million-dollar industry for commercial and recreational fishermen, ecotourism and exporters of shark products. But what's the difference between thinking of sharks as the famous *Jaws* villain or as a kinder, gentler predator like Bruce in *Finding Nemo*? Could future shark populations depend on what you read, watch, hear or see?

by Donna Self



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You got your card sharks, you got your pool sharks, you got your loan sharks, and you've even got the tricky *Saturday Night Live* land shark. All share a common root word, and all refer to a character that you don't want to have anything to do with lest ye be eaten, beaten or experience some other dreaded circumstance.

The shark is probably the most feared creature in the wild, and the truth is some sharks *are* equipped to gobble us up as if we were nothing more than anchovies. Realistically, the odds are well in our favor of living a life of beach time without so much as a nibble, but any shark seen in the movies or on television is usually snacking on some unsuspecting swimmer.

This negative representation of sharks in the media has contributed to a stereotype that encourages public actions and inactions that are harmful to the prehistoric creatures — and in some ways even harmful to humans.

Dr. Robert Hueter, director of Mote's Center for Shark Research, says that probably no media event ever had the impact on the public's perception of sharks as Steven Spielberg's 1975 horror film, *Jaws*, based on Peter Benchley's novel. "The book was effective," he says, "but the movie crystallized a deep-seated fear because it gave a visualization of what it must be like to be attacked by a shark."

The film, which still plays regularly on TV, has maintained its popularity over the past three decades and continues to terrify new generations. Hueter believes that some of the film's direct effects are still being dealt with today. "There is a tangible negative effect of that movie," he says. "There was a definite spike in shark kill tournaments and recreational shark fishing right after the movie came out. Tournament fishermen killed thousands of sharks and just dumped them. That started a trend of shark overfishing and we've been trying to rebuild the numbers ever since."

Hueter says television's coverage of sharks is "highly variable" and often contributes to public misconceptions about the animals. "Some television shows are quite good. They have a lot of information and go all over the world and talk to scientists and look at different species. Some are absolutely dreadful, though. The worst ones are where people who present themselves as scientists are giving information in order to promote themselves, not true understanding of the sharks."

George Burgess is the director of the International Shark Attack File at the University of Florida, and is teamed with Mote through the National Shark Research Consortium. "Movies are not factual media," Burgess says. "They are for entertainment value only, though people take them as the gospel. What gets to me is when the media that are supposed to be dealing with facts are cultivating stereotypes and making it harder for us to get the numbers back up."

Probably the most phenomenal example of this was the summer of 2001, the so-called "Summer of the Shark."

The biggest news that summer had been the Gary Condit/Chandra Levy story until July 6, when a bullshark attacked 8-year-old Jessie Arbogast while he swam at a beach near Pensacola. The story was especially dramatic because his uncle wrestled the shark, dragged it onto the beach by its tail, and a lifeguard retrieved the boy's severed arm from its gullet. Jessie was gravely injured, but lived. The story was in the national spotlight for weeks, and prompted a slew of stories about sharks.

Other events that summer helped to feed the frenzy:

Press helicopters took to flying over beaches looking for sharks and saw what had always been there: sharks.

A man attacked in the Bahamas hired Johnnie Cochran to sue the resort where he had been staying at the time of his attack.

A Daytona Beach, Fla., surfing contest was held in an area of feeding blacktip sharks. Twenty-one minor shark encounters were reported during that period, although not all of them were related to the event.

Every shark encounter was big news and *Time* magazine's July cover declared that it was the "Summer of the Shark."

Two shark attack fatalities occurred over the Labor Day weekend off the coasts of Virginia and North Carolina — unlikely locales for shark-human interactions.

One week later, the Sept. 11 attacks occurred, obliterating all shark stories for some time.

According to Dr. Bob Dardenne, professor of mass communication theory at the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg, the media were just doing what came natural: following a story's lead. "The media tend to group things," he says. "Once the ball gets rolling, it's hard to separate what is significant and what is of the moment. You can't fault the

media for covering the subject. After the Arbogast story, it was natural for other stories to follow, but context was missing. I don't think the media rule out context, but sometimes it takes away from the significance of the story they are trying to write."

Some political commentators began using the shark attacks in their own attack on the Shark Fisheries Management Plan, a federal program initiated to try to replenish depleted shark populations. "One of the things that came out of 2001 is that sharks became political toys," Burgess says. "People tried to use the attacks as proof that the Fisheries Management Plan was unneeded — that the attacks proved that the numbers were up."

While some species may have improved thanks to management rules, the reality is that recovery in some species takes 30 years, and it was scientifically impossible for measures taken in the 1990s to affect the numbers of *all* species.



Nurse shark: *Ginglymostoma cirratum*



Blue shark: *Prionace glauca*



Scalloped hammerhead: *Sphyrna lewini*

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To try to bring context back, Hueter and Burgess teamed with NOAA and Sea Grant to hold a press conference in the spring of 2002 at the National Press Club. “We wanted to try to get the press to adopt some rules of engagement,” Hueter says. “We wanted them to calm hysteria, use perspective and write more articles not focusing on attack.”

Hueter says the press response was positive. “I almost felt ignored,” he says, laughing.

Jaws author Benchley even helped out in the summer of 2001 by conducting interviews with the press. “He did a wonderful job that summer,” says Hueter. “He put things into perspective, saying that the movie was designed to entertain, not to educate.”

Burgess and Hueter stress sharks’ importance in the ecological balance and health of the oceans, which depend on complex food webs involving every sea creature. Just like apex land predators, sharks are important in that balance. “They’re a top predator and few in number,” Hueter says. “When they’re eliminated, there’s nothing to fill in that place.”

More than 100 million sharks are killed each year by fishermen, which can devastate certain species that grow slowly and can take as long as 15 to 20 years to reach reproductive age.

The prehistoric creatures continue to fascinate scientists with their immune and reproductive systems and their advanced senses and they’ve been used as a classic vertebrate anatomy tool for years because they bear many similarities to humans.

And the fact is: Humans aren’t really on the shark menu.

Scientists believe that unprovoked attacks are cases of mistaken identity, or the sharks just having a taste to see whether they want some more. Most of attacks are not fatal. According to the International Shark Attack File, globally, there were 55 unprovoked attacks in 2003, with four fatalities. In the U.S., one is 30 times more likely to be struck by lightning

than to be attacked by a shark, and bees, wasps and snakes cause more deaths each year than sharks.

The number of attacks seems to have risen dramatically in the 1990s, but this is partly attributed to more thorough record-keeping by the International Shark Attack File and more public awareness leading to more reports. Also, the number of shark-human contacts in a year is directly proportional to the number of humans in the sea. As the world population increases and more and more people take to the waters, it is logical that shark attacks, along with other water-related injuries, will increase. Due to overfishing, shark populations are seriously declining in some cases and holding at reduced numbers in others.

According to George Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory, people can be affected by the amount and the content of the TV and movies they watch. The portrayals of things in these media can create a false sense of society. For example, one who watches a lot of crime shows could perceive the world to be a much more dangerous place than it actually is. So be it with TV shows and movies that feature shark attacks. Things can appear to be more common than they actually are. But this isn’t the only reason people fear sharks — sharks do have teeth and can bite. Humans could see other predators coming and kill them with a single shot, but in shark territory, the predator is invisible.

As long as people have taken to the seas, and as long as they continue to do so, there will be shark-human interactions, and there will be stories to be written and movies to be made. Shark scientists just want to stress the importance of keeping things in the right perspective.

“We have an intrinsic concern about animals that can consume us,” says Burgess. “The main thing is that we think we can conquer the world: Dam mighty rivers, blow up mountain ranges and control wild animals. Shark attacks fly in the face of our collective haughtiness.” ■