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Photo by Dan Orr

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SPECIAL FEATURE:

Shark Attacks in Perspective

Excerpted from *Dangerous Marine Creatures* by Carl Edmonds, MD

Photos by Dan Orr, Past President of Divers Alert Network

Our knowledge of sharks has been more on fashion than fact. Just last century they were regarded by the Europeans as scavengers and cowards, and it was seriously doubted whether or not they did, in fact, attack man. The subsequent controversy resulted in a mass of accumulated data that left us in no doubt.

It has been said that the only parts of a shark that cannot be put to good use are its bite and its tail. Authors and film-makers, searching desperately for sensationalist themes which will shock and attract audiences, have even made use of these.

Some localities, especially in the USA, were more likely to repress news of a shark attack, to protect tourism and commercial interests. The film *Jaws* accurately depicted this attitude, and grossed more revenue than any movie in the history of Hollywood.

Rescue and first aid groups also have ulterior motives in sometimes exaggerating the risk of shark attack. Even Sir Winston Churchill, when Prime Minister of England, declared that "The British Government is entirely opposed to sharks" – presumably reflecting the attitude of the majority of voters. Other governments have become involved, as shown by attempts to protect beaches in Australia and South Africa, in funding of shark deterrents and sponsoring of the Shark Attack File in the USA.

Shark attack remains a genuine but unlikely danger to seafaring people. Although rare, the attack is often terrifying in intensity, and the degree of mutilation

produced has a strong emotive effect on civilized people. In this beautiful marine jungle, without the protection afforded by a superior civilization, sophisticated technology, or terrestrial senses, humans are weak and vulnerable.

The value of sharks to the media is best exemplified by the popularity of *Jaws* and the many magazine and newspaper articles. In Australia, where millions of people enjoy the benefits of the Indian and Pacific Ocean beaches each year, many newspapers are sold in the week preceding the summer school holidays by headlining "shark sightings." In fact, even though Australia is renowned as one of the most dangerous areas in the world for shark attacks, and has more recorded attacks than any other country, it now averages only one fatality per year.

In 1968, *Life* magazine published an article together with photographs of a stunt man, Jose Marco, who was attacked whilst filming *Shark*, a low cost thriller.



The huge white shark apparently got through the netting protection. Marco was reported to have died in the hospital two days later. In fact, the shark did not look like a great white. It was probably a drugged bull shark that was pulled through the water and tomato ketchup added. A detailed investigation subsequently revealed that there was no official record of such an attack, no stunt man called Jose Marco, and no hospital records or recollection of the incident. *Life* magazine made no comment.

Information about shark attack comes from detailed observations from interested researchers such as Sir Victor Coppleson (Australia), Dr. David Davies (South Africa), and Dr. John Randall (USA). It is amply augmented by computer analyses of the Shark Attack File. The latter supplied us with many fascinating statistics up until 1967, when the U.S. Navy suspended funding.

Of the recorded case histories, in 25% there was no factual evidence that a shark attack actually happened; in over 50% the earliest documentation was made over a year after the attack; and less than 10% were reported by factual witnesses. The interpretations of this data thus have to be accepted with some caution.

The file included an analysis of 1,165 cases. Divers underwater accounted for 25% of attacks, with 43% of these being free diving (not scuba). Males are attacked 13.5 times more than females, perhaps



because they are more active, and swim further from shore and in deeper water. More attacks take place when the water is warmer, during holidays and on weekends, and in the afternoons – reflecting the greater numbers at risk. About 20% of attacks were associated with line fishing and another 20% with spear fishing.

(Source: *Dangerous Marine Creatures*; Carl Edmonds, MD, 1995. Best Publishing Company.)



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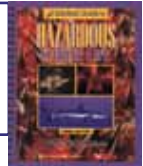
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