

**BEFORE AND AFTER *JAWS*: CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS OF SHARK
ATTACKS**

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ABSTRACT

When the film *Jaws* (1975), about a rogue shark that terrorised a small seaside island community was released, it had an unprecedented paranoia effect on its audience that became entrenched into the psyche of bathers around the world; a fear that media hyperbole exploited. At the same time, the film was also responsible for a surge in scientific interest in sharks and the media responded by giving more attention to the important role of sharks in the marine ecology. In the long term, social perceptions of sharks, changed from fear to conservation, influencing local, national and international government conservation and management policies. Nevertheless, there persists the initial media frenzy after any shark attack and *Jaws* remains the touchstone for media reporting.

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Abbreviations

ADTIC	Arctic, Desert, Tropic Information Centre
AMCS	Australian Marine Conservation Society
ASAF	Australian Shark Attack File
CSFOP	Commercial Shark Fishery Observer Program
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
CITES	Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species
GHOF	Guy Harvey Ocean Foundation
HSUS	Humane Society of the United States
IUCN	International Union of Conservation for Nature
SHC	Shark Hazard Committee
SMAC	Shark Menace Advisory Committee
SMP	Shark Meshing Program
SSG	Shark Specialist Group
SSC	Species Survival Commission

Introduction

History shows us that little was known about sharks. However, the prospect of falling overboard or being shipwrecked and eaten alive by sea monsters loomed large in the minds of ancient mariners. Old-world maps portray illustrations of fearsome creatures, many of which have a striking similarity to the sharks we recognise today. Sailors told terrifying tales, and the stories and superstitions were passed down through the ages. As swimming gradually became an acceptable form of recreation, the average bather knew or cared little about sharks and the tales became accepted as simply sailors' lore and legends.¹ Yet both Australia and the U.S. had their share of shark attacks. Xavier Maniguet explains in his book *Jaws of Death* (1992) that the sharks left 'the realm of myth and legend,' when in 1916, off the coast of New Jersey, there were five attacks in ten days with four fatalities forcing authorities to question their attitudes.² According to journalist and photographer Mac McDiarmid in his book *Shark Attack* (1996), U.S shark experts continued to deny sharks attacked human beings in American waters as late as the 1930s. He claims that it took an attack by a 2.4 metre hammerhead shark on a woman bather at Palm Beach, Florida, to establish the U.S.A. as leaders in research into sharks and their behaviour.³

Writing in 1940, Gilbert P. Whitley, who at the time was the ichthyologist at the Australian Museum, commented in his book, *The Fishes of Australia, Part 1, Sharks &c.*, that apart from Australians, there were many people in the world who did not believe that sharks attacked people.⁴ He concluded that in Australia, 'we have very little to fear from sharks,' and observed that the larger and more dangerous species of shark, (one could assume that he was referring to the great white *Carcharodon carcharias*), do not frequent Australian beaches as a rule.⁵ He

¹ Victor M. Coppleson, *Shark Attack*, (Sydney, London, Melbourne, Wellington: Angus & Robertson, 1958), 5.

² Xavier Maniguet, *The Jaws of Death*, Trans. David Christie (London: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 1992), 35-6.

³ Mac McDiarmid, *Shark Attack*, (Sydney: THE BOOK COMPANY INTERNATIONAL PTY. LTD., 1996), 50.

⁴ Gilbert P. Whitley, *The Fishes of Australia Part 1, The Sharks &c.*, (Sydney: Royal Zoological Society of New South Wales, 1940), 13.

⁵ Whitley, *The Fishes of Australia*, 12.

was joined in this view by shark expert Dr. Copleston, who claimed in his 1958 book *Shark Attack* that despite the evidence of sharks attacking people going back more than 2000 years, there was still an overwhelming number of disbelieving people, especially in the United States. He cites an article that was published in the American magazine *Collier* in 1944. It was during WWII and the author was possibly trying to assuage American servicemen's fears during operations in shark infested water when he wrote, advising anyone who found themselves facing a shark, not to worry, but to grab the pectoral fin, swim with the shark, hold their breath and slit the sharks underbelly so that the water could fill its body and it would die.⁶

It would appear that in Western Australia there was a similar feeling of complacency in earlier days. Victor Courtney in his book *Perth and all this!* (1962), wrote that the majority of people in Western Australia believed that sharks in their part of the country were not dangerous. Regardless of an incident in 1925, when a man was attacked and died at Cottesloe beach one hot summer day and a fatality occurred in the Swan river in 1923, Courtney contends that as there had been no further attacks since 1925, sharks were not considered dangerous in that part of Australia unlike on the east coast. He gives credit to the many safety measures carried out each summer by the city's lifesaving groups, but said that the fact that there were many ocean races even as far as Rottnest island and no sharks had ever been encountered, proved that with reasonable precautions, Perth beaches were safe. But he does admit that in 1962, 'there were frequent shark alarms on metropolitan beaches' and that spear fishermen had seen many sharks cruising off the coast. So he concludes that while our beaches are 'pretty safe', there is always the possibility that some of the sharks, given the opportunity, could prove dangerous to human beings.⁷

⁶ Copleston, *Shark Attack*, 5.

⁷ Victor Courtney, *Perth and all this!*, (Sydney: Halstead Press, 1962), 252.

McDiarmid claims that all this changed in 1974 with *Jaws*,⁸ Peter Benchley's best-selling book about a large rogue shark that terrorised a fictitious small island community off Long Island. When the book first appeared in the bookstores, it thrilled the public with the idea that sharks could attack people. But, says McDiarmid, the subsequent film of the same name released the following year, had an even more sensational impact and broke all Hollywood box-office records. Shark hysteria gripped people around the world and the fear was reflected on shores and beaches in reality, just as it was depicted in the movie; bathers were afraid of the potential terror lurking below. As McDiarmid quite rightly states, the media were quick to exploit the public's reaction and fed the paranoia that the film and its subsequent spin-offs generated; awareness of sharks was raised to unprecedented levels.⁹ Following the film's release, *Time* magazine carried a terrifying picture of an opened mouthed shark across its front page with the caption, 'The Super Shark'¹⁰ and its main feature was an in-depth article titled 'The Summer of the Shark'. In a quote from the article, *Time* declared, 'If the great white shark that terrorises the beaches of an island summer colony is one of nature's most efficient killing machines, *Jaws* is an efficient entertainment machine'.¹¹

But is the '*Jaws*¹² effect' still working? Have the media continued to exploit the public's fear? Is the public still afraid to go into the water? Are they still afraid of what may lurk below or did *Jaws* raise the profile and understanding of sharks? In November 2000, *The West Australian* newspaper dramatically headlined a fatal shark attack at North Cottesloe Beach, continuing the sensational reporting within the paper, including a sombre article titled 'The Day it All Changed' in the accompanying magazine.¹³ A year later, *The West Australian* revived the memory

⁸ Peter Benchley, *Jaws*, (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd., 1974).

⁹ McDiarmid, *Shark Attack*, 88.

¹⁰ 'Summer of the Shark', *Time*, 23 June, 1975, Vol. 105, No. 26, web page, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,913189,00htm1> accessed 17/09/2010.

¹¹ 'Summer of the Shark', *Time*.

¹² *Jaws*, DVD, Directed by Steven Spielberg, Universal Studios, 1975.

¹³ *The West Australian*, Tues. 7 November, 2000, Western Australia.

of the attack and dedicated much of its reporting to sharks, including a claim by reporter Frank Robson that 'menacing great whites circle Australia's coastline'.¹⁴

Similarly in the U.S. in 2001, according to *Shark Savers org.*, when eight year old Jessie Arbogast had his arm bitten off in the waters of Pensacola, Florida it created a media frenzy. Any shark encounter after that, no matter how insignificant was reported in prime time.¹⁵ In the same year, *Time* once again used its front cover to feature an open mouthed shark, but this time with the disturbing caption 'Summer of the Shark.'¹⁶ Inside, an article by Timothy Roche, titled 'Saving Jessie Arbogast', graphically detailed the attack on the boy and his subsequent rescue.¹⁷ Moreover, the feature article by Terry McCarthy et al., 'Why can't we be friends?', claimed that shark attacks had been on the rise in recent years and devoted his article to exhaustive accounts of attacks.¹⁸ This claim was dismissed by *Shark Savers org.* as untrue and simply media hype.¹⁹

30 years after the release of the film *Jaws*, Stephan Lovgren, writing for the *National Geographic News* in 2005, reported that the perception that sharks were 'stalking, killing machines' remained in the public's psyche. He quoted George Burgess, shark biologist at the University of Florida in Gainesville as saying that the shark population plunged after thousands of fishers attempted to catch trophy sharks after seeing *Jaws*. At the same time, the unprecedented success of the movie created invaluable scientific and public interest in sharks.²⁰

So what is the public perception of sharks and shark attacks in 2011? Is *Jaws* paranoia still entrenched in the public mind, and if it is, are the media still

¹⁴ Frank Robson, 'A Monster of Our Own Making', in Big Weekend, *The West Australian*, Saturday 17 February, 2001.

¹⁵ *Shark Savers*, 2007, web page, <http://www.sharksavers.org/en/education/shark-myths/23-media-hype.htm1> accessed 10/12/2009

¹⁶ 'The Summer of the Shark', *Time*, 30 July, 2001, Vol. 158 No. 4, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000420,00htm1> accessed 17/09/2010.

¹⁷ Timothy Roche, Alice Jackson, 'Saving Jessie Arbogast', in *Time*, 30 July, 2001, Vol. 158 No. 4.

¹⁸ McCarthy, Terry, et al., 'Why can't we be friends', *Time*, July 30 2001 Vol. 158 No. 4, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1000420,00htm1> accessed 17/09/2010.

¹⁹ *Shark Savers*.

²⁰ Stefan Lovgren, 'Jaws at 30: Film Stoked Fear, Study of Great White Sharks', in *National Geographic News*, June 15, 2005, web page, http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/06/0615_050615_jawssharks.html

exploiting public fear? In his book *The Encyclopedia of Sharks* (2008), zoologist and author Steve Parker examines the life and biology of sharks and concludes that human beings have come a long way from an attitude of 'disdain and kill-at-all-cost', to one of respect and awe.²¹

This thesis will examine the devastating impact that the 1975 film *Jaws* had on world shark populations. In the process I will analyse the media exploitation of the unprecedented fear of sharks and shark attacks it produced. The film was also responsible for a surge in scientific interest in sharks. I will argue that as shark populations plunged, public and government agencies developed a greater awareness and consideration of the shark and its environment, which shaped policies locally, nationally and internationally. I will further argue that while the media played a dominant role in changing attitudes, there persists the initial media frenzy immediately after any shark attack and *Jaws* remains the touchstone for reporting.

In Chapter One, I outline historical attitudes to sharks and shark attacks, and discuss the development of methods for shark protection. In the following chapter I introduce the film *Jaws*, directed by Steven Spielberg, and show how the film entrenched 'shark paranoia' in the psyche of bathers worldwide; a paranoia that was exploited by the media. In Chapter Three, I examine the devastating consequences the '*Jaws* syndrome' had on shark populations and argue that the media used the terror, generated by the film, to shape public attitudes of fear. Chapter Four is a case study of media hype that substantiates my argument. In Chapter Five, I examine the shark conservation issues and government policies that arose from shark population decline, and present my evidence of the changing community and government attitudes from fear to conservation.

²¹ Steve Parker, *The Encyclopedia of Sharks*, (London: A & C Black publishers Ltd., 2008), 185.