

**Submission
No 7**

MANAGEMENT OF SHARKS IN NEW SOUTH WALES WATERS

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The Chairperson
Inquiry into Management of Sharks in NSW Waters

Please find below my submission into the above.

Introduction

I have lived in Ballina for 35 years and in that time I have surfed most places from Byron Bay to Yamba. I have been surfing for over 47 years, from a youngster at Merewether Beach in Newcastle to the present day (sharks permitting). I still get the same buzz surfing now as I did when I was a 10 year old. I have even had two ambulance rides to hospital from two very dramatic surfing accidents when I experienced two near death experiences.

During those 47 years of surfing I have never experienced a period like the past 11 months (September 2014 to August 2015) where the area has had two fatal shark attacks and at least 8 severe attacks and/or close encounters. In all my years of surfing I have probably seen 2 shark fins cruising about 30 metres from me. When at school and when I was working, I was one of those dawn surfers that went for a surf before school/work and often before the sun was up.

I surf for the pure enjoyment of it, the pleasure I get from it and when I was working it provided a stress relief mechanism. Surfers solve many of the world's problems sitting around waiting for the next set of waves.

The current situation is unprecedented. I thought when I retired, I would surf every day without a care in the world. I have had to change my surfing habits: picking the times I go out, being more aware of bait balls, number of surfers out, always looking around and down and across the ocean. I have painted the bottom of my board the Bandy Bandy poisonous snake black and white stripes and purchased a Sharkbanz magnetic ankle strap as the whole situation was doing my head in. Those two actions may not prevent a shark attack, but, I had to do something.

I know there is not a quick fix to this issue. There is no right answer to the current spike in shark attacks/close encounters and I believe there is probably no one solution as well. And that is the frustrating thing that local surfers are experiencing at the moment – the not knowing and still wanting to surf whenever and wherever.

It is not just a Ballina coastline problem, it includes the whole coast line from Tweed Heads to Newcastle and therefore the State Government needs to take a leading role in this. As with any problem a State Government is faced with, politics seems to dominate rather than the issue at hand.

In the meantime, following the Shark Summit on the 29/9/15, I trust some of the technologies can be trialled immediately and not wait for the outcome of this Inquiry as one can only hope there is not another fatality or severe attack before the situation gets back to "normal", whatever that is.

Terms of Reference

a) The impact of shark attacks on tourism and related industries

The beach & surf culture is deeply engrained in our Australian lifestyle. All the towns scattered along our coastline rely to a great extent on tourism and this has a flow on affect on other industries in the town.

The following is a link to a recent story about a business in Ballina being affected by the current shark crisis:

The Ballina Chamber of Commerce conducted a survey on the impacts of the shark issue and even though 85% of the respondents said there has not been a downturn, the chamber did admit that the majority of the other 15% were mainly surfing related industries. I could not find the news story to that.

I do know of one surf related business and the owner told me that since the serious attack on Matt Lee on the 2/7/15, the sales of surf accessories like leg ropes, wax, board covers etc has dropped by 90%. He does not wish to name his business at this stage, but, I have encouraged him to make a separate submission.

However, I am sure that if there is another fatality from a shark attack or someone sustains a serious injury from a shark attack, other surfing related industries and tourism will suffer the consequences.

b) Changes in shark numbers, behaviour or habitat. c) Adequacy of management strategies

I believe the Great White shark was included in the protected species in the late 1990's. Since the shark attacks I have heard different numbers quoted by Department of Primary Industries, CSIRO etc. I keep hearing from shark experts and scientists that world wide, Great White numbers are still low. However the frustrating thing is that no expert, scientist or organisation can say how many Great Whites are actually travelling along the east coast of Australia and /or is that number adequate or not for the marine habitat. Local professional fisher people tell me the ocean off the North Coast of NSW coastline is teeming with sharks, including Great Whites.

If the Great White shark or any animal is put on a protected species list, then adequate scientific monitoring should have been implemented to provide this basic information needed to review the situation. It appears the authorities have let the community down on this aspect.

The five fatal attacks that have occurred along the NSW coast since 2008 include 1 Bull Shark at Ballina in 2008, 1 Tiger shark at Coffs Harbour in 2013, 1 Bronze Whaler at Tathra in 2014, 1 Great White at Byron Bay in 2014 and 1 Great White at Ballina in 2015.

I usually surfed at dawn as a school student and when I worked and the authorities always say the worst time to be in the water is at dawn or dusk. During winter and when I worked I had the occasional surf after work and get out almost on dark.

I have always been wary of surfing at break walls at river entrances due to the presence of Bull sharks, especially after heavy rain. This was the case of the fatal shark attack at Ballina in 2008 when a young person was body boarding at North Wall in murky water following a lot of rain.

Apart from the attack on Graig Ison at Evans Head at approx 6.10am on 1/8/15, all the attacks from September 2014 to August 2015 have occurred in the middle of the morning on a bright sunny day with clear visibility in the ocean. I have not researched all the other 300 attacks Australia wide between 1995 - 2015 (Source: Australian Shark Attack File, Taronga Zoo)

The question still remains – why so many attacks from September 2014 to August 2015 and the attacks have occurred almost in every season.

My own observations are as follows:

*Approx. 7 attacks have been in the winter months. The sea surface temperature did not go below 20 degrees during those months (source: BOM)

*Increase in the number of bait balls and they appeared to drift closer to the shoreline.

Statements from marine biologists and scientists like “It’s a worldwide trend that populations of sharks have declined, not increased” and “We understand so little about sharks in general” (Source: SBS Insight program 29/9/15), do not instil much confidence in the wider community that the authorities really know the reason for the spike in attacks that have occurred from September 2014 to August 2015. They say there are spikes in shark

sightings/encounters and attacks in areas from time to time, but, again I say not to the extent of the attacks witnessed at the moment.

Measures to prevent attacks by sharks, including strategies adopted in other jurisdictions

I don't believe in a shark cull as that is just the "wild west, get the posse out" mentality. I have had some vigorous debate with fellow surfers on the shark cull idea. **But, it is hard not to go down that path when surfing means so much to a person.** However, I emphasise again, the authorities have no real idea of real numbers of sharks off the coast and whether some sharks are continually coming closer to the shoreline and therefore having contact with surfers, swimmers etc.

With a proper monitoring program, if it is proven a shark is responsible for continual attacks/encounters, then the removal of that shark is probably justified.

Netting is problematic. Statistics indicate netting works as shark attacks/encounters around Wollongong, Sydney, Newcastle, Gold Coast have been very minimal. However, even with the netting, sharks still come close to those shorelines. There were three sightings of sharks off Gold Coast beaches from the 7/10/15 to the 10/10/15. (Source: Facebook sight called Shark Reports)

When I was staying at Newcastle in January 2015, the beaches from Redhead to Stockton were closed for 10 days due to the presence of sharks.

However, statistics do prove that the netting of beaches does play a significant factor in greatly reducing the likelihood of a shark encounter and/or attack. Netting began off Sydney in 1937 and today 49 beaches covering 200km from Newcastle to Wollongong are netted

(Source:http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/208319/FR24-shark-meshing.pdf)

The last fatal shark attack off the metropolitan coastline was in 1966. From 1982 to 2015, there have been 7 fatal attacks off the NSW coast – 3 off Byron Bay, 2 off Ballina, 1 off Coffs Harbour, 1 off Tathra. (Source: ASAF, Taronga Zoo)

Again from the ASAF Taronga Zoo and the SBS Interactive Map of shark attacks in Australia(<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2015/09/25/map-where-have-sharks-attacked-people-australian-waters>), from 1995 to 2015 there have been approx 300 shark attacks around Australia both with injuries and non-injuries. From the above I determined approx 40 of the attacks were along the netted metropolitan beaches of NSW. Although not 100% shark proof, people do appear to be safer at a netted beach

Therefore, questions of equity come into play. If it is proven the netted beaches saves injuries and lives and it is along the 200km of the metropolitan coastline, why isn't it rolled out to other parts of the coastline?

However, there is collateral damage with other marine life. I have been unable to locate exact information on this issue as different sources indicate different numbers. I hope another submission is able to supply correct data on this question.

I am probably more in favour of shark monitoring & deterrent technology and shark surveillance & early warning methods. I am sure the Inquiry will have access to the results of the Shark Summit of 29/9/15, but, Coastalwatch supplied the following summary:

<http://www.coastalwatch.com/surfing/14909/the-great-shark-summit-of-sydney>

During the school holiday period, 19/9/15 to the 5/10/15, the Dept. of Primary Industries funded a aerial surveillance program from Byron Bay to Evans Head. I can tell you, there was nothing more reassuring for a

surfer then to see that helicopter fly over AND NOT circle above you – it meant the area around you was clear of sharks. Likewise, the local funded program of the Ballina Shire Council on Sundays and the voluntary aerial surveillance during other times was also reassuring. The Ballina Council Shark Group has protocols in place for shark sightings and I believe it has been responsible in ensuring no further attacks have occurred since Craig Ison's on 1/8/15 as people are responding quickly when the helicopter spots a shark

<http://www.echo.net.au/2015/10/surfers-head-for-shore-after-shark-spotted-at-boulders-beach/>

However, shark surveillance is not cheap and it cannot be sustained economically along the whole NSW coast, 7 days a week, from dawn to dusk. Perhaps during school holidays and therefore it will need to be budgeted for in the future.

With today's technology and from the results of the Shark Summit of 29/9/15, I am confident the NSW Government will use a variety of methods, some to be used everywhere and others at selected areas due to practicality.

I attended the shark meeting at Lennox Head on the 16/10/15 and I found it very informative, especially the information about the tracking of Bull sharks in the Sydney Harbour and the tracking of the 12 Great Whites off the North Coast as part of the \$250,000 shark mitigation program. I suggest the DPI become more pro-active by informing the general public about exactly what they are doing as lack of information about their activities creates rumours about what they are doing.

I was pleased that the Minister for Primary Industries, Niall Blair, gave an assurance that the North Coast would be trialling the latest shark detection and deterrent technologies before the busy summer period

There is a time factor involved as the impact of these attacks from Byron Bay to Yamba is having an impact on the local communities – the victims, victims family and friends, Emergency Services personnel who attend the attacks, hospital and medical staff, wider community and tourists who may be influenced by the media frenzy.

Conclusion

I repeat again that during my 47 years of surfing I have never experienced a period like the one from September 2014 to August 2015 in regard to the number of shark attacks on surfers. There have been spikes in attacks in the past, BUT, never to the extent witnessed during the above period.

The frustrating aspect of the situation is that the shark experts/scientists cannot really explain the reason(s) for the increased attacks. As a result there is heightened publicity of the area by the media and some businesses have suffered a downturn.

I am grateful for the DPI commenced the \$250000 shark mitigation program and I am hopeful the final recommendations from the Shark Summit of the 29/9/15 will include the North Coast to trial some or all of the emerging shark detection and deterrent technologies.

The local community is hurting from those shark attacks during September 2014 to August 2015 and is looking for reassurance to get back to a normal North Coast lifestyle and coastal economy.