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The Accidental Aggressor?

When a previously hooked juvenile great white shark bit a swimmer off the Manhattan Beach Pier this summer, the unfortunate attack sparked a heated debate across the South Bay: Who's to blame for the incident? The shark... or the fisherman? We dive further

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Most rarely see the creatures cruising beneath the waters that lap against our front door. But the locals who surf, swim, dive or paddle will tell you that the Santa Monica Bay is rich with wildlife. A whole host of fish, marine birds and mammals (including seals and dolphins) call the bay home.

There's also another group of creatures that reside comfortably right off our sandy beaches: the apex predators, namely great white sharks. According to the LA Times and a recent study, it's estimated that there are 2,400 great whites swimming off the California coastline.

These ancient creatures (their toothy ancestors were swimming about when dinosaurs were at the top of the food chain) are intimidating, to say the least. But it's important to note that sharks don't actively seek humans as prey.

As far as deadly animals go, mosquitos cause more than 600,000 human deaths per year around the world, according to the World Health Organization, while National Geographic News reports that sharks only cause five to 15 fatalities annually. Furthermore, Ralph Collier—the founder of the Shark Research Committee—says there have only been 186 shark attacks along the Pacific coast of North America since 1926.

However, while it's extremely rare, incidences involving great whites do occur, even here in the South Bay. On July 5, a juvenile great white bit local resident Steven Robles while he was swimming near the Manhattan Beach Pier. The shark, which had been hooked by a man who was fishing off the pier, struggled for 30 to 40 minutes before being released. The agitated shark then lashed out at the nearest thing it could find.

“When the shark was fighting for its life,” says Ralph, “it had struck out at [Steven] because it was trying to get away.” Steven, who suffered nonfatal wounds, has since recovered.

The attack, while terrifying for all those involved, was a provoked one. But the event struck a chord with many South Bay residents, who were concerned that something similar could happen again. Fishing off the pier was banned for 60 days beginning on July 7, and the city of Manhattan Beach is currently working with the state of California to determine if further regulation is needed to safely fish off the pier.

The attack has raised an interesting question, one that seems to spur both concern and curiosity amongst our residents: Why are there great white sharks swimming off the Manhattan Pier?

True Locals

Dr. Chris Lowe, who runs the California State University of Long Beach's Shark Lab, notes that great whites can be found in cool, temperate waters throughout the world. Despite the animal's range of habitat, scientists still have a lot of questions about these animals.

In the past, it was believed that great whites could live for 20 to 30 years, but recently it's been discovered that they can live into their 70s. Regarding Pacific great whites, we're not exactly clear where they mate or give birth either. However, what is known is that juvenile great whites are often spotted off the Southern California coastline during the summer.

These juvenile sharks, which typically range from 4.5 feet (newborn) to 7 feet, are highly migratory. Dr. Lowe has tagged a large number of juveniles throughout Southern California, from Santa Barbara to Dana Point, and he's found that many of these animals often spend their first summer around our sandy beaches.

Once the water temperature starts to rise, they will start to migrate south toward Baja. "Mostly what we find along our coastline in the summer are young of the year," says Dr. Lowe, adding that the majority of these animals are born sometime that year, though the occasional 1- or 2-year-old is also found.

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So why are these animals coming to the shores of Southern California, like those seen along the South Bay? Dr. Lowe believes that one possible theory might be because of our local fish populations. "They're primarily eating stingrays, flatfishes—those types of animals are readily abundant off our sandy beaches, and they're easy for them to catch," says Dr. Lowe.

"This is nothing new," says Ralph in regard to why white shark juveniles can be found in the South Bay. "It has to do with physiology and the requirements that the newborns need to survive."

Ralph adds that local grunion runs also provide an ample amount of prey for these animals. "They have to start feeding right away when they are born. There's no maternal nurturing from their mothers—they're on their own. They need a readily available source of food to build up their energy reserves."

Generally speaking, local juvenile white sharks tend to steer clear of humans. "These animals avoid humans because we're larger than they are, and we could be a potential threat," says Ralph.

Once they grow in size and begin to mature, they begin to head toward waters with larger pinniped populations (seals and sea lions). These animals become their optimal prey of choice due to their high fat content.

Pinnipeds usually tend to prefer rocky beaches for hauling out. Dr. Lowe notes that the coastline being generally rockier north of Point Conception might be one reason why there are sometimes more adult great whites found to the north of Southern California.

While it's difficult to accurately nail down white shark behavior in general, it's possible that the South Bay acts as a stopover for young great whites as they develop and grow. According to the Daily Breeze, the juvenile shark involved in the July attack was roughly 6 to 7 feet, which seems to be typical of what Eric Martin observes near the Manhattan Beach Pier.

"We get them here anywhere from 5 to 8 feet," says Eric, the co-director of the Roundhouse Marine Studies Lab and Aquarium. "People think this is an area where there's only sand, a few fish and nothing else." But he notes that the region is rich with marine life.

A South Bay local who has grown up surfing and diving these waters, he notes that he's seen a few more white sharks in recent years. Under a California law (passed in 1994), it's illegal to fish for white shark. Furthermore, Dr. Lowe points out that pinniped populations, which were utterly decimated during the early and mid-20th century due to hunting, have risen steadily in the past few decades. These factors have probably led to an overall increase in the shark population here in California.

"At one point in the beginning of August, we had seven [white sharks] around the pier," says Eric. During the temporary ban on fishing at the pier (and partially due to warmer waters), Eric points out that the pier became a marine sanctuary of sorts.

He dove off the pier during the ban, and he saw a wide assortment of creatures, including rays, anchovies, sardines and leopard sharks, which were feeding in and around the pier. White sharks were attracted as well. "We had a smorgasbord out here," says Eric.

Though Eric shares similar theories to Dr. Lowe (these juveniles are most likely enjoying a steady supply of fish off our sandy beaches, and they stop here to feed and grow before traveling on), both note that it's hard to say definitively why they are congregating around the pier or how long they've been coming to this area. These animals are still not well-known, and further research is needed.

"The incident itself was just the perfect storm of bad luck," says Dr. Lowe about the Independence Day weekend incident. "When you put all the components together—a lot of sharks, fishermen and swimmers all together at once—that's when something unusual can happen."

Dr. Lowe adds that we're experiencing a changing ocean. Better environmental protection is leading to a return of apex predators to Californian waters. While Eric and Dr. Lowe note that the incident was unusual, the two would like to see fishing regulations set in place to prevent a similar event from reoccurring.

Go Fish

Regarding the July incident, it's important to note that attacks (and provoked events involving hooked sharks) in the South Bay are extremely rare. But many locals are calling for some sort of fishing regulations to be placed on the pier to prevent an incident like this from occurring again.

Eric is quick to note that most fishermen who utilize the pier do so properly and respectfully, but he believes that by placing regulations on the type of equipment used by local fishermen, if any large marine animals are caught again, they'll be able to break free on their own accord—and they won't struggle for a lengthy period of time. "At least if you use monofilament line and you hook up to a great white, it's going to be bit off in three to five minutes at least."

"I want to protect you whether you are surfing, swimming or fishing," says Amy Howorth, the mayor of Manhattan Beach. Following the July 5 incident, a temporary moratorium on fishing from the pier was passed and then extended into a 60-day ban.

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The city of Manhattan Beach also wanted to pass fishing regulations for the pier that would include limiting the type of leaders used, banning fish-cleaning off the pier and also prohibiting the use of any fishing line other than monofilament line—especially line with a tested maximum of 40-pound line weight. However, the California Department of Parks and Recreation owns the pier, and the city didn't have the jurisdiction to pass those regulations.

"We've been fishing on the pier for a long time," says Sonke Mastrup, executive director of California Fish and Game Commission. He notes that Fish and Game and other state departments need to be consulted before any regulations occur. The city of Manhattan Beach is now working with state organizations to determine if further regulation is needed.

"Anglers by background are conservationists," says Marko Mlikotin with the California Sportfishing League. "What occurred was extraordinary." Marko notes that only the state can pass further fishing regulations, and that the event itself was a one-of-a-kind incident—therefore, it doesn't require additional regulations.

Additionally, he adds there are often injuries related to other water activities, like surfing, swimming and stand-up paddleboarding, but regulations for these activities are minimal. "There's an inherent risk for any recreation that involves water and marine life," he says, adding that while the fisherman involved in the incident may have acted in an irresponsible way, South Bay fishermen shouldn't be disciplined as a whole. "An entire fishing community shouldn't suffer the consequences due to an extraordinary situation."

"Unfortunately this problem, which seems like it has a simple solution, does not," says Amy. While the state will determine if additional regulation is needed, for now South Bay residents should keep in mind that they share the Santa Monica Bay with a protected species—one that ultimately deserves our respect.

Whether or not additional regulations are enacted, as lifeguard Kyle Daniels points out, beachgoers have a right to use the beach for their hobbies and activities. In the end, compromise and respect is all that's needed. "It's complicated in the sense that there are a lot of people," says Kyle. "I hate to simplify it, but it's about being fair."