

Shark attack worries? Driving to the beach is more deadly

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Which is more likely to happen - you being in a car wreck or being bitten by a shark?

Those who answered that cars are greater killers win a free trip to the beach. It's really no contest, says a Texas A&M University professor. Your chances of being in a wreck are far greater than being a shark's lunch, says John McEachran, a professor of wildlife and fishery sciences who has studied sharks for years.

Worldwide, about one million people a year are killed in auto accidents, including more than 42,000 a year in the United States.

McEachran goes on to note that far more people die each year - about 90 worldwide - from an allergic reaction to eating peanuts.

Despite several attacks in Florida recently - one that killed a 14-year-old girl - shark attacks remain very rare when you put it all into perspective, McEachran believes.

"There are millions of people in the water at any given moment of the day," he notes.

"When you consider all of the people in the water at the same time, the number of shark attacks is very, very remote. Your chances of winning the lottery are greater than being attacked by a shark.

"But when a shark attack does occur, it makes big headlines. The drive

you will make to the beach is far more dangerous, but an auto accident that kills several people will not make big headlines across the U.S. But a shark attack on one person will."

According to the International Shark Attack File, only seven fatalities occurred worldwide due to shark attack in 2004, there were only four in 2003, and only three in 2002.

Florida, with its large coastline and warm waters, leads all states with an average of about 30 shark attacks per year, followed by California (6), Texas (4), Hawaii (3), North Carolina (2) and Alabama, South Carolina and Oregon each reporting one.

McEachran says shark attacks are far less frequent causes of injury than driving, boating and diving accidents.

He says when most attacks occur, they happen in 3 to 4 feet of water. "But often, that can mean you're several hundred feet away from the beach," he notes. "Also, most attacks occur in water that is murky and not very clear.

"A greater percentage of beachgoers are injured by jellyfish, stingrays or hardhead and gafftop fishes, which have poisonous spines. They are more likely to cause harm than a shark."

He says when shark attacks occur, often they are accidental.

"Humans are not a shark's preferred food choice," he says.

"They don't regard the human shape as a prey item. Sometimes you hear reports of surfers having their boards hit by a shark, and it's probably because the board resembles the shape of a seal, which is a prime food source for sharks."

McEachran says some common sense can go a long way in avoiding contact with sharks.

"Sharks generally don't like to be around people," he adds.

"Most people are safe at the beach. To put your mind at ease, go to a beach that has lifeguards. They should be looking for possible sharks.

"Shark attacks are like airplane crashes," he notes. "The vast majority of airplane trips are safe, but when a crash occurs, it gets big headlines. If you use some good common sense in the water, you should be fine."

Source: Texas A&M University

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