

UF study: World shark attacks rise slightly but continue long-term dip

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Shark attacks edged up slightly in 2006 but continued an overall long-term decline as overfishing and more cautious swimmers helped take a bite out of the aggressive encounters, new University of Florida research finds.

The total number of shark attacks worldwide increased from 61 in 2005 to 62 in 2006 and the number of fatalities remained stable at four, far below the 79 attacks and 11 fatalities recorded in 2000, said George Burgess, director of the International Shark Attack File housed at UF's Florida Museum of Natural History.

"This was a nice dull year and we love dull years because it means there are fewer serious attacks and fewer victims," Burgess said. "It's really quite remarkable when you have only four people a year die in the mouth of a shark and puts in perspective how small shark attack is as a phenomenon."

Fewer sharks are swarming near the shore where humans swim as larger numbers of shark and other fish of prey are killed each year, Burgess said. At the same time, many Third World countries are making strides in improving medical care and beach safety, while many people are getting smarter about where and when to get into the water, he said.

"They're starting to see that when they enter the sea, they're engaging in a wilderness experience as opposed to entering the equivalent of a backyard pool," he said.

As a result, the rate of attacks has actually declined over the years as human population has increased, he said.

The number of attacks in the United States, the world's leader, dipped slightly from 40 in 2005 to 38 in 2006; well below the 53 recorded in 2000, he said.

As in past years, Florida was the world's shark capital, with 23 attacks, Burgess said. This was slightly higher than the 19 cases reported in 2005 but considerably lower than the annual average of 33 between 2000 and 2003, he said.

Elsewhere in the world, Burgess tracked seven attacks in Australia, four in South Africa, three in Brazil, two in the Bahamas and one each in Fiji, Guam, Mexico, New Zealand, Puerto Rico, La Reunion, Spain and Tonga.

The four fatalities were in Australia, Brazil, La Reunion and Tonga. The Australian victim was a woman swimming with her dog, and the attack may have been provoked by fishermen throwing bloodied fish in the ocean as they cleaned their catch. The Brazilian fatality was a male surfer in waters off the northeastern part of the country. The Tonga case involved a 24-year-old female swimmer who was an American Peace Corps volunteer. The attack off the Indian Ocean island of Reunion was on a 34-year-old male surfing in an area where swimming and other recreational activities are forbidden.

With globalization, not all people are taking precautions as they venture into remote corners of the world that once were sleepy villages with strictly native populations, he said.

“Some of these tourists bring their aquatic recreation to places known to be sharky without asking the natives about good and bad places,”

Burgess said. “The natives may know that you don’t go into the water off a certain point because that’s where the big tiger shark is, and the French tourist who decides to go sailboarding there gets grabbed by the tiger shark.”

Surfers and windsurfers were the most frequent victims in 2006, accounting for 26 of the shark attacks, followed by swimmers and waders, 21, and divers and snorkelers, five.

Besides Florida’s 23 attacks, elsewhere in the United States attacks numbered four in South Carolina; three each in Hawaii and Oregon; two in California; and one each in New Jersey, North Carolina and Texas.

“Within Florida, Volusia County and particularly New Smyrna Beach is the hot spot,” he said. “This area on a square mile basis has more attacks than anyplace else in the world.”

A nearby inlet draws many swimmers, surfers and sharks, which find all the splashing, kicking and other movements humans make in the water highly provocative, Burgess said.

Shark attacks in Volusia County increased from nine in 2005 to 12 in 2006. Numbers of attacks recorded in other Florida counties were three in Brevard, two each in Manatee and St. Lucie and one each in Collier, Monroe, Indian River and Palm Beach.

“Even though there are a large number of attacks in Volusia County and along the entire east coast of Florida, the injuries are seldom very serious and fatalities are highly unusual,” he said.

Source: University of Florida

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