

2012 US shark attacks highest since 2000

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Shark attacks in the U.S. reached a decade high in 2012, while worldwide fatalities remained average, according to the University of Florida's International Shark Attack File report released today.

The U.S. saw an upturn in [attacks](#) with 53, the most since 2000. There were seven fatalities worldwide, which is lower than 2011 but higher than the yearly average of 4.4 from 2001 to 2010. It is the second consecutive year for multiple shark attacks in [Western Australia](#) (5) and Reunion Island (3) in the southwest Indian Ocean, which indicates the localities have developed problematic situations, said George Burgess, director of the file housed at the [Florida Museum of Natural History](#) on the UF campus.

"Those two areas are sort of hot spots in the world – Western Australia is a function of white shark incidents and Reunion is a function most likely of [bull shark](#) incidents," Burgess said. "What I've seen in all situations when there's been a sudden upswing in an area is that human-causative factors are involved, such as changes in our behavior, changes in our abundance, or an overt shark-attracting product of something that we're doing."

Eighty unprovoked attacks occurred worldwide, slightly more than 2011. Four attacks were recorded in South Africa, three of which resulted in death, which is higher than its recent average of one fatality per year. Australia had an average year with 14 attacks and two fatalities, despite the media attention regarding incidents in Western Australia that resulted in a government-sanctioned culling hunt for endangered white

[sharks.](#)

"The concept of 'let's go out and kill them' is an archaic approach to a [shark attack](#) problem, and its opportunities for success are generally slim-to-none," Burgess said. "It's mostly a feel-good revenge – like an 'eye for an eye' approach – when in fact you're not likely to catch the shark that was involved in the situation. The shark that was involved in the situation also isn't necessarily likely to do it again."

Following long-term trends, most shark bites occurred in North American waters (42). The 53 U.S. incidents include Hawaii and Puerto Rico, which are not recorded as occurring in North American waters in the International Shark Attack File database. Florida led the country with 26, followed by Hawaii (10), California (5), South Carolina (5), North Carolina (2) and one each in Georgia, Massachusetts, New York, Oregon and Puerto Rico. One fatality occurred in California, and Hawaii had the highest number of attacks since seven in 2007, more than its yearly average of four. Most incidents in Florida occurred in Brevard (8) and Volusia (7) counties because these central east coast beaches are high aquatic recreation areas, especially for surfers, Burgess said.

"The numbers from an international standpoint were on target for the last couple of years because, in theory, each year we should have more attacks than the previous year owing to the rise of human population from year to year," Burgess said. "Thus the shark attack rate is not increasing even though the number of shark attacks is rising. Shark attack as a phenomenon is extremely uncommon, considering the millions of hours humans spend in the water each year."

The 2012 U.S. fatality rate of 2 percent is far lower than the 22 percent for the rest of the world, likely due to superior safety and medical capabilities in the U.S., Burgess said.

"We could reduce risks by avoiding areas and times when sharks are most common, and where danger is at its highest," Burgess said. "A perfect example of that is in Western Australia, where people have been getting hit in areas of known white shark abundance at times of year when [white shark](#) numbers are at their highest – the responsibility is upon us, as humans, to avoid such situations or else pay the consequence."

Surfers experienced a majority of shark incidents with 60 percent, largely due to the provocative nature of the activity. Swimmers were affected by 22 percent of attacks, followed by divers, with 8 percent.

Burgess said 30 million to 70 million sharks are killed every year in fisheries, and people need to recognize humans pose a greater threat to elasmobranchs (sharks, skates and rays) than sharks do to humans. Worldwide over-fishing, especially to meet demands for flesh and fins used in shark fin soup, an Asian delicacy, continues to contribute to the decline in shark populations, Burgess said.

In the case of a shark attack, researchers advise taking a proactive response, such as hitting the shark's nose, since they respect size and power.

"Shark attacks are rare and it doesn't matter whether you call them attacks or bites or bumps – your chances of having any of them are slim," Burgess said.

More information: For additional safety tips and to view the 2012 Worldwide Shark Attack Summary, please visit www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/sharks/isaf/isaf.htm

Provided by University of Florida

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