

Indian Ocean paradise island beset by shark controversy

August 29 2013, by Jean-Noel Fortier



French ecologist, Didier Derand, 55, throws himself into the sea at the site of shark attacks, on the Roches Noires beach in Saint-Gilles-les Bains, in the French Indian Ocean island of La Reunion on August 19, 2012. To prove sharks are not dangerous for swimmers but are the victim of "propaganda" Derand decided to swim 4.6 kilometers in a marine reserve where sharks killed two surfers last year

The dangers of shark attacks are no secret for Georges, who as a kid was repeatedly warned to beware of the large predators lurking in the tropical

waters off his native Reunion island.

That was several decades ago, and the issue since then has mushroomed in the French Indian Ocean island following several deadly shark attacks, sparking a tug of war between those who want to protect the fish and those who would like to see preventative culls.

"We always talked about sharks in the Reunion. When I was a kid, our parents were already warning us," said Georges, who did not give his surname, as he took in the rays on a beach protected from the sea predators by a coral reef.

But the 48-year-old, who now lives in mainland France and was holidaying on the island, said the issue had become increasingly high-profile in recent years, "because the attacks have multiplied."

Since 2011, there have been 12 shark attacks in the Reunion, of which five were deadly.

Just this year, a French honeymooner died when he was attacked by a shark as he surfed, and a [teenage girl](#) was killed while swimming just metres from the shore.

Swimmers, tourists, surfers, [fishermen](#), politicians, authorities, activists: all have firm—and often clashing—opinions on how to handle a situation that is harming the Reunion's reputation as a paradise destination.

While none deny that shark numbers have increased, they differ on the reasons for this recent spike.

Some point to the [wastewater](#) that is discarded into the sea from ever-expanding urbanised zones, full of [organic compounds](#) that the sharks

come to devour.

Others blame the 40-kilometre (25-mile) long natural marine reserve along the coast—created in 2007—where fishing is either banned or strictly regulated.

"This reserve has become a pantry for sharks," one surfer said.

"They settle where they know they can feed themselves."



Members of the Research Institute for Development return to Saint-Gilles on La Reunion, on August 10, 2012, after a patrol to tag and count sharks. Shark attacks have been increasing in the last two years on the island.

And aside from the reserve, professional shark fishing in general has come to a halt.

In 1999, authorities banned the commercialisation of sharks on the island as the fish was thought to be contaminated with ciguatoxins, poisonous organic compounds that cause serious food poisoning.

Then in 2004, those who traded in shark fins—a hugely controversial delicacy in some Asian countries—were banned from fishing sharks.

Faced with the increase in the sea [predators](#) and following the deadly attacks, the prefect of the island announced a slew of measures in July, including banning swimming, surfing and bodyboarding off more than half of the coast.

He also said 90 sharks would be culled—45 bull sharks and 45 tiger sharks—on top of the 20 already killed as part of scientific research into ciguatera, the illness caused by eating fish flesh contaminated with ciguatoxins.

But he acknowledged the cull was not only scientific but also aimed at "reducing the shark population".

Thierry Robert, a prominent politician on the island, has called for more "preventative culls".

But the idea has been slammed by environmentalists keen to protect sharks, some of which are seriously threatened worldwide.

Didier Derand of the Brigitte Bardot Foundation, an animal rights organisation, is challenging the existing cull in court.

He is being assisted by Sea Shepherd, the international marine wildlife conservation organisation, "because we need worldwide awareness of the organised massacre of sharks."

According to Sea Shepherd, 100 million sharks are killed each year by sport fishermen or by those who practice shark finning, which consists of catching the fish and slicing off their fins while they are still alive.



A bull shark swimming in a tank in Brest, France on September 3, 2003. Shark attacks have been increasing near the Indian Ocean island of La Reunion over the last two years.

The organisation says sharks are being depleted faster than they can reproduce, threatening the stability of marine ecosystems around the world.

Authorities in the Reunion island are also looking at other ways to protect [swimmers](#), such as using aerial balloons equipped with surveillance cameras and alert systems when they detect movement in

the water.

The island's Saint-Paul district has opted for drum lines, devices fixed with hooks that are meant to capture sharks.

Meanwhile, surfers and bodyboarders say they refuse to be sacrificed in the name of marine conservation.

"We have to stop this worldwide lobbying that advocates the protection of [sharks](#)," says Jean-Francois Nativel, head of the Ocean Prevention Reunion association, which works on reducing the risks of [shark attacks](#).

"We're in the era of Flipper the shark. We have to break the taboos... We have to bring back fishing, and put the shark back in the plates of Reunion people," he said.

But Jean-Rene Enilorac, head of the regional fishing committee, was dubious.

"Even if there is no longer a risk of ciguatera, I'm not sure the Reunion inhabitants will eat shark again," he said.

"Who will want to eat a fish, imagining it maybe devoured a human being?"

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