

## Shark sightings off US state a boon for tourism (Update)

July 21 2014, by Rodrique Ngowi

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In this July 2, 2014 photo, vacationer Mark McCurdy, of Everett, Mass., examines shark-themed clothing at the Chatham Clothing Bar in Chatham, Mass. Growing sightings of great white sharks off Cape Cod are generating business for local entrepreneurs as residents and tourists seek a glimpse of the offshore predators—or purchase their shark-themed memorabilia and apparel. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Its reputation as a man-eating predator aside, the great white shark is

emerging as a boon for tourism on Cape Cod, the Massachusetts peninsula popular among beach combers.

Unlike the classic thriller "Jaws," in which one of the animals terrorizes a small island, the sharks that have been spotted in growing numbers are stirring more curiosity than fear—and a buying frenzy for shark-related merchandise.

Shark T-shirts are everywhere, "Jaws" has been playing in local movie theaters and boats are taking more tourists out to see the huge seal population that keeps the sharks coming. Harbormasters have issued warnings but—unlike the sharks in the movies—the great whites generally are not seen as a threat to swimmers.

Among the entrepreneurs is Justin Labdon, owner of the Cape Cod Beach Chair Company, who started selling shark-themed T-shirts after customers who were renting paddle boards and kayaks began asking whether it was safe to go to sea.

"I mean, truthfully, we've probably grown about 500 percent in terms of the sale of our shark apparel," he said. The T-shirts, hoodies, hats, belts, dog collars and other accessories bear the iconic, torpedo-shaped image of great whites and sell for between \$10 and \$45.

He said his store brings in thousands of dollars in sales of the merchandise.



In this July 2, 2014 photo, a bin is filled with plastic toy sharks in a souvenir shop in Chatham, Mass. With growing sightings of great white sharks off Cape Cod, local entrepreneurs are feeding the frenzy with their shark-themed memorabilia and apparel. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Tourists peer through coin-operated binoculars in hopes of catching a glimpse of a shark fin from the beaches of Chatham. The posh resort town is on the elbow of the cape that has a large population of gray seals, whose blubber is the fuel of choice for great white sharks. Local shops sell jewelry, candy, clothes, stuffed animals and beverages with shark motifs.

A study released last month by the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration found the number of great white sharks off the Eastern U.S. and Canada is surging after decades of decline. Conservation efforts and the greater availability of prey such as Massachusetts' seals are credited with the reversal.

Shark sightings have soared from generally fewer than two annually before 2004 to more than 20 in each of the last few years off Cape Cod, where the economy depends heavily on the summer tourism season. Despite notices urging boaters and swimmers to use caution, the official reaction has been nearly the opposite of the panic depicted in "Jaws," the 1975 film shot mainly on the Massachusetts island of Martha's Vineyard.

"White sharks are this iconic species in society and it draws amazing amounts of attention," said Gregory Skomal, a senior marine fisheries biologist who leads the Massachusetts Shark Research Program, who said people are coming in hopes of witnessing the animals in their splendor. "I have not been approached by anyone who has said to me 'let's go kill these sharks.'"

Skomal said sharks have been coming closer to shore to feed on the seals, which he said have been coming on shore in greater numbers because of successful conservation efforts.

Confrontations with people are rare, with only 106 unprovoked white shark attacks—13 of them fatal—in U.S. waters since 1916, according to data provided by the University of Florida.



In this July 2, 2014 photo, an eye glass holder in the shape of a shark rests on a shelf in a souvenir shop in Chatham, Mass. With growing sightings of great white sharks off Cape Cod, local entrepreneurs are feeding the frenzy with their shark-themed memorabilia and apparel. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

Still, officials are wary of the damage that could be done to tourism if one of the predators bites someone. Brochures have been distributed to raise awareness of sharks and safe practices in the event of a sighting.

"If they go to the beach and they see a family of seals there, that's probably not the best place to hang out," Cape Cod Chamber of Commerce CEO Wendy Northcross said.

Laurie Moss McCandless of Memphis, Tennessee, has vacationed on Cape Cod every summer since she was a little girl and doesn't remember hearing about sharks back then. But her son is obsessed with sharks, she said, and she's hoping to learn more about them.



In this July 2, 2014 photo, Molly Saint-James, of Baltimore, right, helps her daughters Ellie McDonald, left, 6, and Poppy McDonald, 3, use telescopic viewers overlooking a beach while on vacation in Chatham, Mass. Growing sightings of great white sharks off Cape Cod are generating business for local entrepreneurs as residents and tourists seek get a glimpse of the offshore predators—and purchase their shark-themed memorabilia. (AP Photo/Steven Senne)

"He loves all his sharks paraphernalia," McCandless, 39, said as she bought a shark-themed sweatshirt for one of her three children.

**More information:** Cape Cod Tourism: [www.capecodchamber.org/](http://www.capecodchamber.org/)

Massachusetts Shark Research Program:

[www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dfg/.../shark-research.html](http://www.mass.gov/eea/agencies/dfg/.../shark-research.html)

Atlantic White Shark Conservancy: [www.atlanticwhiteshark.org/](http://www.atlanticwhiteshark.org/)

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