

Shark populations suffer from undue reputation

January 27 2015, by Adrian Peace

Sharks have been making news yet again, after a spate of sightings in Newcastle, New South Wales, prompted days of beach closures and reports of oceangoers allegedly being "[stalked](#)" by "[monster](#)" specimens.

Similarly, when West Australian teenager [Jay Muscat](#) was killed by a shark on December 29 last year at Cheyne's Beach, near Albany, the state's media understandably covered the incident in detail, with an ABC television report claiming that a shark had been seen "stalking" the area for about week before the tragedy.

This term also appeared in subsequent media reports about a local family who, three days before the incident, had reportedly been "[stalked](#)" by a shark at the same beach. One family member expressed her guilt at not having informed the Department of Fisheries about the shark, which she [described](#) as "menacing".

"Stalking" and "menacing" are graphic, emotive words, typically reserved for criminal behaviour on a serious scale. Petty thieves don't stalk; rapists and assassins do. Armed robbers are menacing; shoplifters not so much.

What is also important about this language is that it connotes behaviour which is deliberate, conscious, and calculating. In the wake of human encounters with [sharks](#) (and particularly [great white sharks](#)), we are used to hearing that a shark has "stalked" an area to "target" a victim. Most people don't consider this terminology inappropriate, despite the fact

that the animal is being crudely demonized.

This characterisation is quite arbitrary, as shown by the fact that a minority of observers choose instead to emphasize the "incidental" and "accidental" nature of the same attacks. But this latter interpretation tends to be buried under the flow of negative and emotive words.

The language of crime

Plenty of other metaphors of criminality are also used to characterize sharks in Australian waters. Great whites are routinely said to "[lurk](#)", "[linger](#)", "[prowl](#)", "[maraud](#)" or "[loiter](#)" near "innocent" or "unsuspecting" bathers.

Sharks "encroach on", "intrude into", and "invade" the water near beaches, marinas and surf breaks. When an attack takes place across these presumed boundaries, whole populations of people are "[terrorized](#)" into leaving the water, enduring a [summer of fear](#) at the mercy of "[rogue](#)" sharks.

After a tragedy, the shark is still ascribed with qualities of deliberation and calculation. It is said to have slipped away and avoided capture, even "gone under the radar". The "[elusive](#)" or "[evasive](#)" killer shark retreats into the vast, unfathomable ocean like a professional assassin disappearing into the anonymity of the city. The shark takes flight, successfully "[giving authorities the slip](#)". "It'll be miles away by now" is a frequent complaint.

Descriptions of this kind suggest that, like a fugitive from justice, the animal knows it is at large and is weighing up its options: flee the scene, or return to the place of its initial attack and launch another one.

Why do we treat sharks like criminals?

Among developed world populations, Australians are arguably unique in living alongside a considerable number of indigenous wild animals with the capacity to kill them. (Europeans and North Americans rarely come face to face with bears or wolves these days.) Whether it's the redback spider in the chook shed, the brown snake under the veranda, the pure-bred dingo on Fraser Island, or the vast population of crocodiles across the Top End, Australians know how deadly the local wildlife can be.

But none of these – not even crocodiles – is linguistically maligned with quite the same degree of opprobrium, even hatred, as the great white shark. Why?

There are several reasons, but the most important is that while it is easy to ascribe human characteristics to sharks (as we have seen above), many people find them difficult to love, or even to like.

When wild creatures bear even the vaguest resemblance to humans or domesticated animals, this can afford them a level of protection from untrammelled exploitation. The danger which they might pose is somehow offset by some semblance of similarity in appearance or behaviour. The purely wild dingoes of Fraser Island were treated like domestic dogs until we [realised they could be deadly](#).

It is difficult to think of sharks in this benevolent way. The black and beady eyes, the gaping jaw, the rows of serrated teeth, the seemingly malevolent expression, the immense body size – all seem to justify the final damning characterisation as the "ultimate killing machine".

It is important for this narrative that the damage wrought on the victim's body by a great white is immense. Although media reports respectfully attempt to gloss over exactly what happened at the moment of impact,

we nevertheless have accounts of bodies being "bitten in half", limbs eviscerated, and – perhaps most powerful of all – victims who are never found at all.

Fearsome Nature

In other words, what gives sharks their unrivalled symbolic character is the fact that they are a living testament to the destructive capacity of Nature.

The fact that great whites remain beyond our control runs entirely counter to the trajectory of recent history where human-animal relations are concerned.

The UC Berkeley geographer Michael Watts has [described this relationship](#) as "a gigantic act of enclosure". The routine capturing, corralling, and containment of animals by humans has become a dominant pattern.

We kill animals and commodify their bodies and other products in endless ways – in battery chicken farms, piggeries, and even the crocodile farms of Australia's tropical north.

Exceptionally, the great white shark has so far escaped the ignominies and impacts of enclosure enforced on other animals, including most wild ones.

Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that through our ways of speaking we tend to condemn the great white for resolutely remaining well beyond the pale, just as we do with other extreme and uncontrollable elements on the margins of our society.

This is a culturally complex issue, beyond the scope of linguistic fixes

like replacing the emotive terms such as "[shark attack](#)" with more prosaic ones like "shark bite". But we should nevertheless start paying as much attention to how we talk about our encounters with sharks as we do to the encounters themselves.

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