

Australian surf spot reeling from spate of shark attacks

July 8 2016, by Glenda Kwek



Twenty-two unprovoked shark attacks were recorded in Australian coastal waters in 2015, with only one fatality

Ever since surfer Garry Meredith rushed to the water to help save a man mauled by a shark off Australia's east coast, he has not been able to get back on his board.

It has been a year since bodyboarder Matt Lee was hauled in from the

sea, haemorrhaging blood after a four-metre [great white shark](#) bit his legs.

Lee survived but for veteran lifesaver Meredith the memories remain vivid. He helped paramedics stem the bleeding after the attack at Lighthouse Beach in the picturesque town of Ballina.

Beach culture is core to local identity but a rise in shark sightings and attacks has shaken many residents.

"After that experience... my surfing completely stopped," Meredith told AFP.

"I'll get back eventually, but I'm not ready to go back in yet."

The incident came some five months after a fatal attack at a nearby beach when he had been on duty.

Lee was one of 14 people involved in unprovoked shark attacks off the coast of New South Wales in 2015 up from three in 2014, according to records at Sydney's Taronga Zoo.

Most occurred along a 60-kilometre (37-mile) stretch from Evans Head to Byron Bay—with Ballina, a popular surf break 740 kilometres north of Sydney, between the two.

The region, renowned for its powdery white beaches and rugged coastline, has long been a magnet for surfers but fear has set in.



Australian lifesaver Garry Meredith on shark patrol in a custom-made rescue boat off the coast of Ballina, in April 2016

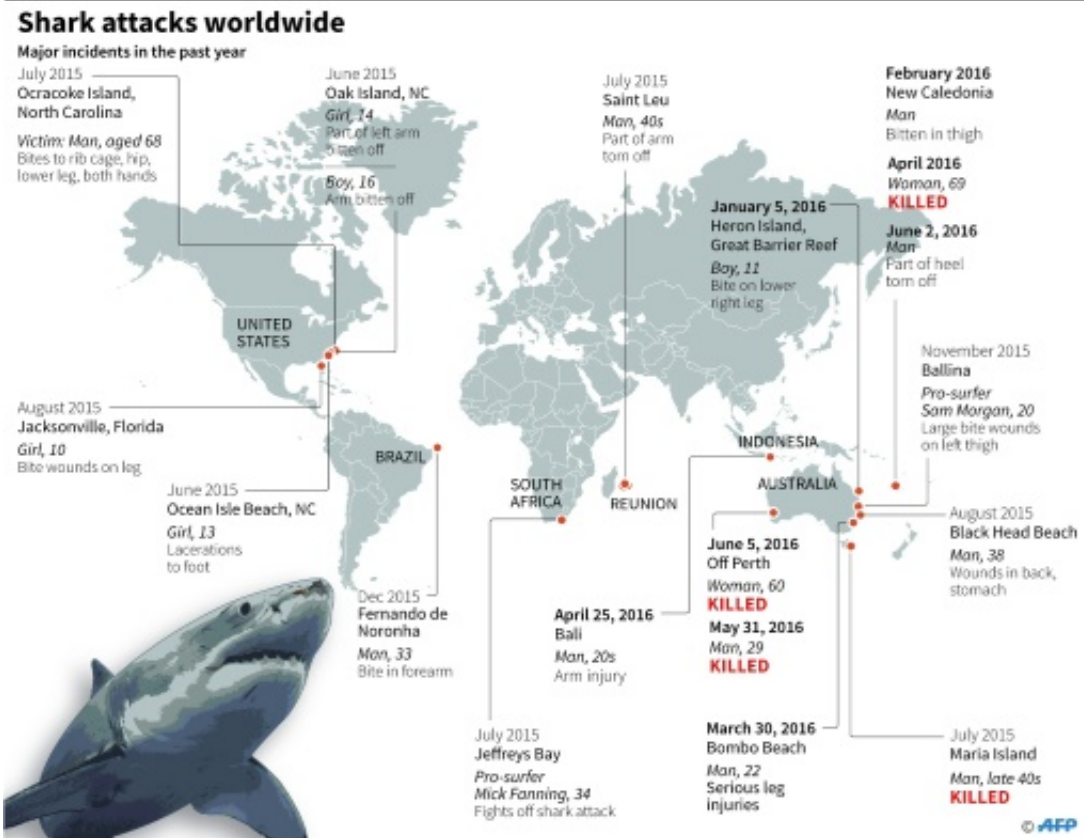
"(Some) boardriders won't go back in or they're not ready to go back in yet. I think they're scared enough to make that decision," Meredith said, adding: "But then you've got the die-hard guys that need to get that surf in every day, so they'll take the risk."

Culling is 'prehistoric'

Last year Japanese surfer Tadashi Nakahara died after his legs were ripped off at Ballina's Shelly Beach by a great white—a protected species. It was the only fatality from 22 unprovoked shark attacks in Australian coastal waters last year.

The encounters prompted calls for a shark cull, but Ballina's mayor David Wright is unequivocally against this.

He explained: "I think the culling of anything is basically a prehistoric type of way to deal with it. You just don't kill something because you don't get on with it."



There were 98 shark attacks globally in 2015, the highest number ever recorded

But there is no agreement on the best approach to prevention, and state governments along the more than 30,000-kilometre Australian mainland coastline have adopted different measures.

Drum lines, where baited hooks are attached to floating barrels positioned a set distance off beaches, are deployed to catch [sharks](#) in Queensland. Some are collected and released elsewhere, many die on the

hooks. The state also uses nets, which entangle them, causing them to drown.

Conservationists have heavily criticised both measures and point out they also result in the death of other marine life.

Western Australia, which has suffered more than a dozen shark attack fatalities since 2000, dumped a controversial catch-and-kill policy and now uses aerial patrols among other measures but maintains the option of killing sharks deemed an imminent threat.



There is no agreement in Australia on how best to deal with sharks so state governments along the coastline have adopted different measures

Close encounter

The New South Wales government has ruled out culls instead employing other measures such as aerial monitoring and buoys with satellite receivers to track tagged sharks.

There were 98 shark attacks globally last year—the highest number ever recorded, according to researchers at the University of Florida, which has been collecting data since 1958. The French island of La Reunion was the "most deadly" with two out of the six fatalities resulting from such incidents worldwide.

George Burgess, director of the International Shark Attack File at the university, told AFP in February the increase in attacks could be due to rising water temperatures caused by climate change, which has led the sharks change established routes.

He also suggested the El Nino weather pattern, which was particularly powerful last year, caused warmer sea temperatures drawing more people to the beach.



Children play on a shark net in Sydney's Little Manly Cove

But marine ecologist Rob Harcourt of Macquarie University warned that without long-term data it was difficult to pinpoint the factors behind attack clusters in Australia and more research was needed.

In Ballina, lifesavers, fishermen and surfers insist they have seen more sharks in recent years and closer to shore.

At the spectacular surfing spot of Boulders Beach, aerial patrols have spotted large sharks up to three metres long, Meredith said.

"Sightings have been really in close...in the whitewater probably 10 metres, if that, off the beach and they are just swimming up and down the gutters (deeper channels)," he added. "We've been told they're just looking for food."

Dave Pearson, founder of survivor support group "Bite Club", was bitten by a three-metre bull shark while surfing at Crowdy Head, another picturesque area in New South Wales, in 2011. It tore down to the bone on his left arm and smashed his skull.



Surfers make their way over rocks to surf in Ballina, the Australian town now infamous for a spate of shark attacks

"For the town here, for my mates and for my family, it never ends," he explained, adding that the focus should be on helping communities after attacks.

He said: "If we accept that there will be so many attacks a year... each (family) will cost us "X" amount in mental health, physiotherapy, and we want to be helping to provide that service."



Dave Pearson was attacked by a bull shark in 2011 which tore down to the bone on his left arm and smashed his skull

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