

Research group confirms white shark nursery off Long Island

October 6 2016, by Philip Marcelo



In this Aug. 23, 2016 photo provided by OCEARCH, a juvenile male great white shark named Paumanok swims away after researchers tagged and sampled him off the point of Montauk, N.Y. The expedition said it has confirmed that waters between southern Massachusetts and New York's Long Island point are a "nursery" where the powerful predators spend much of the first year of their lives feeding and growing. (Robert Snow/OCEARCH via AP)

A privately funded great white shark research group has confirmed the

waters off Long Island's Montauk Point are a "nursery," a first in the study of great whites in the northwest Atlantic Ocean, the organization and other leading scientists say.

But the OCEARCH expedition, which is wrapping up months of work in the region Friday, is generating more than just scientific intrigue as it works off Long Island and Nantucket.

The Park City, Utah-based organization has also been embroiled in a public spat with shark researchers in Massachusetts, who accuse OCEARCH of encroaching into state waters without a permit and possibly compromising the state's own white shark research with its tactics.

OCEARCH founder Chris Fischer maintains his team has legally remained in federal waters off Nantucket and that there's "no scientific basis" for the concerns over his team's methods, which include using fish chum to lure sharks, hooking them, and then lifting them out of the water to take samples and apply GPS monitoring devices.

"I'm saddened and shocked by the whole issue," Fischer said Wednesday from Nantucket. "We're generating really priceless data. We're thrilled with what we've accomplished. We just didn't expect to take a beating along the way."

The nonprofit, which operates largely on corporate funding, gained headlines in late August after confirming evidence of a white shark nursery off Long Island's Montauk Point.



In this Aug. 28, 2016 photo provided by OCEARCH, Capt. Brett McBride kneels beside a juvenile female great white shark named Montauk after researchers tagged and sampled her off the point of Montauk, N.Y. The expedition said it has confirmed that waters between southern Massachusetts and New York's Long Island point are a "nursery" where the powerful predators spend much of the first year of their lives feeding and growing. (Robert Snow/OCEARCH via AP)

Robert Hueter, the OCEARCH expedition's chief scientist, said earlier this week that the nine newborn sharks they tagged have largely remained in the area, bolstering the organization's claim that the waters are a "true nursery" where great whites spend the first year of their life, and possibly even where the sharks mate and give birth.

"The tracking confirms they're in fact hanging around this area, feeding and growing," he said.

Scientists not affiliated with the project say the waters around Montauk Point as well as those as far north as Cape Cod and as far south as New Jersey have long been considered part of a regional white shark nursery.

But the phenomenon hasn't been as well-studied on the East Coast as it has along coastal California, Mexico, Australia and other white shark hot spots, acknowledges Christopher Lowe, director of the Shark Lab at California State University in Long Beach.

"It's not necessarily new, but it's new for there," he said. "It will be interesting data for sure. But it's not the invention of sliced bread, either."



In this Aug. 23, 2016 photo provided by OCEARCH, researchers draw blood from a juvenile male great white shark after named Paumanok after tagging him off the point of Montauk, N.Y. The expedition said it has confirmed that waters between southern Massachusetts and New York's Long Island point are a "nursery" where the powerful predators spend much of the first year of their

lives feeding and growing. (Robert Snow/OCEARCH via AP)

Newborn [white sharks](#), which are roughly five feet long and weigh about 50 pounds at birth, aren't reared by their mothers and must immediately start to fend for themselves. That's why they're drawn to shallow, coastal areas where easily captured prey is plentiful and predators, like older sharks, are few, Lowe says.

Years of study on white shark nurseries in the Pacific suggest water temperature is also a factor for young sharks, Lowe added. He expects the Montauk Point newborns to begin moving to warmer southern waters as winter approaches.

Gregory Skomal, a leading Massachusetts shark biologist who is among those raising concerns about OCEARCH's work off Nantucket, cautioned it's too early to conclude the area off Montauk Point is a birthing or mating site for white sharks.

The powerful predators have never been documented mating or giving birth, and sharks in general have been known to travel great distances in their first year of birth, he says.

Hueter, who also serves as director of the Center for Shark Research at Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium in Sarasota, Florida, says the OCEARCH team will be returning to the northwest Atlantic in the coming years to continue studying newborn and mature white sharks.



In this Sept. 22, 2016 photo provided by OCEARCH, a female great white shark named Miss Costa swims off a shark lift after researchers tagged and sampled her off Nantucket, Mass. The expedition said it has confirmed that waters between southern Massachusetts and New York's Long Island point are a "nursery" where the powerful predators spend much of the first year of their lives feeding and growing. (Robert Snow/OCEARCH via AP)

"The stuff we're doing is groundbreaking," he said. "It simply hasn't been done out here."

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