

Shark bite research reveals politicians' fishy behaviour

April 15 2019

More than a decade's worth of research has revealed how politicians manipulate highly emotional incidents like shark bites to influence public sentiment and protect their own interests.

University of Sydney public policy expert, Dr. Christopher Pepin-Neff has spent the past 10 years investigating [public attitudes](#) to sharks and how emotions are pitted against evidence-based policymaking in the wake of incidents where sharks bite humans.

The rise of shark "attack" discourse

In his new book, *Flaws: Shark Bites and Emotional Public Policymaking*, Dr. Pepin-Neff argues that fear of a shark "attack" is a perfect example of the way politics works against the public.

"Shark bites can have tragic outcomes that directly affect sections of the public. However, from an objective evidence-based analysis, what we are seeing is not a reasonable response but a theatrical political process, whereby an isolated and individual human tragedy is made worse when these incidents are politicised and sensationalised by the media," he said.

"The saying 'if it bleeds, it leads' is certainly true of the media frenzy over shark incidents—when the media headlines read "[shark attack](#)" and convey a very serious or fatal human-shark interaction, regardless of the details and even if there is no injury to report."

How emotions influence policymaking

Dr. Pepin-Neff's analysis of policy responses to shark bite incidents in Australia, South Africa and the US found a "worrying style of policymaking" where public interest and [scientific evidence](#) often came second to political motivations.

"For example, I found that in Florida and New South Wales, sharks had been portrayed as 'the enemy', [shark bites](#) were seen as intentional, and policy responses appear to be based on 'public safety'," he said.

"However, this is not reflective of what the scientific evidence tells us—that shark bites are ungovernable accidents of nature, and that we are 'in the way, not on the menu'.

"This shows how policymakers manipulate these highly emotional situations to make it appear like they are protecting the public and doing 'good' work. This is a scam to defraud the public for mere political gain. The real 'sharks' of this story are the politicians."

Little public support for killing sharks

Having examined the use of lethal shark control measures—including shark nets in New South Wales, drum lines in Queensland, and shark hunts in Western Australia—Dr. Pepin-Neff said he could find no greater purpose for them than political opportunism.

"One of the worst kept secrets in Australia is that lethal shark control programs are a scam," he said.

"My research has shown that the public knows this—for years I have looked across Australia for [public sentiment](#) to match the political

dialogue that supports lethal nets, culls, hunts, and drum lines but the reality is that these options are now out of touch with the public."

What needs to change

Dr. Pepin-Neff said that politicians need to "dial back the rhetoric" following highly emotional events.

Specifically, he said the New South Wales and Queensland governments should end all lethal shark control programmes, and instead work with the Federal Government to invest in better education about shark behaviour and human behaviour.

"I have spent two decades working in politics—the public deserves better following tragedies than politicians trying to protect themselves. The time has come for our policymakers to do better and to stop providing a false sense of security," he said.

He also urged the Australian media to stop referring to all shark-related incidents as "attacks".

"As far back as 2013, my colleague shark scientist Dr. Robert Hueter and I proposed new options: 'shark sightings', 'shark encounters', 'shark bites' and 'fatal shark bites'. At worst, media should rely on our academic categories, at best they should wait a few days after an incident and ask those involved to tell their story in the terms they want to," he said.

More information: www.palgrave.com/la/book/9783030109752

Provided by University of Sydney

Citation: Shark bite research reveals politicians' fishy behaviour (2019, April 15) retrieved 2 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-04-shark-reveals-politicians-fishy-behaviour.html>

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