

# Jellyfish, not Jaws: Survey reveals what we fear most in the ocean

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As the weather heats up this week, shark sightings and the possibility of an encounter will again become a popular topic of conversation. And if mass media accounts are anything to go by, you would be forgiven for

thinking we all share this fear of potentially meeting Jaws on our next trip to the beach.

But according to new University of South Australia research, it is drowning and other animals—such as jellyfish, crabs, and stingrays, not an encounter with Jaws, that people fear when they take a dip.

In a survey of 400 participants who were prompted to explain why they were afraid of going in the ocean, sharks appeared well down the list, coming in fourth behind drowning, other animal encounters and deep water.

UniSA Online course facilitator for psychology, Dr. Brianna Le Busque says the results of the study are surprising, given the media's portrayal of shark-human interactions and the animal's vilified status in popular culture.

"We've all seen Jaws and read the sensationalized headlines about shark "attacks"—given sharks' representation in the mass media, it would be easy to assume that everyone's biggest fear is an encounter with a shark," she says.

"In reality, our study found more people fear drowning than sharks when it comes to swimming in the ocean.

"It's promising to see that people's fears are actually aligned with the statistical chance of these threats, given many more people drown per year compared to fatal shark interactions."

The results are good news for shark conservation as they indicate a shift in [public perception](#), according to Dr. Le Busque. She says changing people's perception of sharks is critical to protect them, with many species experiencing population decline.

"Even though many shark species are at risk of extinction, [mass media](#) still tends to focus on threats from sharks to humans, rather than from humans to sharks," she says.

"This can have devastating consequences for the world's shark population with effects we will all feel.

"Sharks play an integral role in our marine ecosystem. They have been around for more than 400-million years keeping our ocean habitats intact, which is important as oceans provide much of the oxygen we need to live.

"We know that people are less likely to support conservation initiatives and more likely to support potentially harmful mitigation strategies if they fear sharks. To support shark conservation, we need to reduce the perception of risk sharks pose to better reflect reality.

"That's not to say we need to get rid of this fear altogether, but we need the fear to be proportionate to the threat."

Dr. Le Busque, whose research focuses on the psychology of [shark conservation](#), says another interesting finding from the study was that 22 percent of respondents had experienced a known encounter with a shark in the wild.

"This number was far higher than we expected—almost one in every four people had seen a shark in real life," she says.

"In a way, this finding reaffirms the need for us to reframe how we view shark and human interactions—most sharks species are not known to harm humans."

The results from the study were published in *Journal of Environmental*

*Studies and Sciences* in a paper titled "People's [fear](#) of [sharks](#): a qualitative analysis."

**More information:** Brianna Le Busque et al. People's fear of sharks: a qualitative analysis, *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* (2021). [DOI: 10.1007/s13412-020-00654-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s13412-020-00654-1)

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