

Court orders New Caledonia to stop culling sharks

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The authorities regularly warn bathers of the shark threat.

A court in New Caledonia on Thursday ordered the authorities to stop hunting sharks, saying multiple culls were a "disproportionate" response to any danger to swimmers.

The French Pacific territory has been scrambling to protect its busy beaches from sharks after two attacks earlier this year, one of them causing the death of an Australian tourist.

For a while it banned sea bathing outright, and recently installed a controversial net to keep sharks out.

Since the start of the year, the capital Noumea has also declared open season on sharks, running several campaigns of "preventative" shark hunting in the hope of making beaches safe again.

A total of 127 sharks have been killed this year—83 tiger sharks and 44 bulldog sharks—according to the ocean-protection NGO Longitude 181.

Another NGO, "Ensemble pour la Planete" (United for the Planet) filed a legal challenge to the policy with the territory's administrative court which handles cases involving the government.

The court ruled that the systematic culling campaigns by the city of Noumea were "disproportionate" to the threat, especially as there had been no scientific study of the shark populations targeted, nor of "the impact on the environment".

It also ruled that the southern province of New Caledonia had been wrong to allow Noumea city hall to kill sharks in maritime reserves "where fishing is banned by definition".

"Limited" and "proportionate" exceptions were possible, but the shark culling program was neither, the court ruled.

"It's a lovely Christmas present for the planet," Didier Derand, president of an NGO calling "for a healthy environment" (Vagues), told AFP.

According to a study conducted by La Reunion university, there were no shark attacks in Noumea before 2010, but 13 since, out of a New Caledonian total of 32.

Nobody is sure what prompted the sharks to arrive in unusually high numbers in the bays around the capital Noumea, which lies about 1,200 kilometers (750 miles) east of Australia.

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