

Our Ocean Backyard — *Santa Cruz Sentinel* columns by Gary Griggs, Director, Institute of Marine Sciences, UC Santa Cruz.

#188 July 11, 2015

Sharks in our Backyard

Sharks, mountain lions and tsunamis... Each of these produces some level of anxiety or fear in most of us. The phrase- “danger is fascinating, no matter how remote”- comes to mind. No matter how small the odds or how low the probability of injury or death, the mention of any of these usually gets our attention.

These past several weeks have witnessed several front-page shark events, in our backyard and in North Carolina. These also just happened to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the release of JAWS - an interesting coincidence.

The beaches of North Carolina saw eight shark attacks in shallow water over a two-week period, with injuries ranging from minor wounds to two requiring amputations. This has been the greatest number of North Carolina shark attacks in any single year in the 80 years of record keeping by the Florida Museum of Natural History’s International Shark Attack File. If you happen to be curious, this is an easily accessible on-line site to go to for all manner of shark attack information.

The beaches of North Carolina have seen 52 shark attacks over the past 80 years, but just three fatalities, the last was 14 years ago. So considering the millions of people who visit the beaches of the Outer Banks each year, the odds are pretty low of being attacked by a shark.

Heading south to Florida, however, significantly elevates your risk of a close encounter. In the 130-year period from 1882-2014, 717 shark attacks have been reported in Florida waters, five or six year each year, with 11 fatalities.

We were more fortunate these past two weeks in Monterey Bay, however, where our close encounters only included sightings. A group of juvenile great whites were seen between the 25th and 30th of June in the Seacliff Beach area. Depending upon where you were and when, as many as 13 “small” sharks were seen, with lengths reported from four to as much as 12 feet. I think “small” may be a subjective term here.

The description by various onlookers was that these juveniles were behaving themselves and not exhibiting any aggressive behavior. The appearance of a group of young sharks this large is not a normal event here in Monterey Bay, and warmer water has been offered as one explanation. Twelve feet sounds like a pretty large teenage shark, and perhaps everyone was fortunate that these little guys were just enjoying the warm water and not engaged in any sort of juvenile feeding frenzy.

Knowing that these small, non-aggressive, great white sharks were just hanging out, I decided on July 4th to go for a paddle. I took off from the stairs below West Cliff Drive just beyond Cowells, and headed out around the end of the wharf and then paddled to the west jetty of the harbor.

I must admit I thought about the possibility of a group of sharks beneath my board, but immediately dropped the thought. After turning around at the jetty and heading back, I noticed there was a yellow flag with a black circle flying from the lifeguard tower on Seabright Beach. I had no idea what that meant, but wondered if it might be some type of caution flag, like a shark warning. While there were people in shallow water, no one was offshore swimming.

I was about 150 yards offshore, when I noticed one of the lifeguards was trying to yell something at me and was waving his arms. I couldn't hear him and thought, not much I can do now about a shark now, so I'll just keep paddling.

A bit further along, there was another lifeguard, and she was also waving and yelling. I could hear her, and she was telling me I needed to be out beyond the white swim buoys on my paddleboard.

I headed out about 25 or 30 yards to the buoys, and paddled back towards the wharf and Cowells, happy to know they weren't warning me of sharks nearby. I later learned that the yellow flag with the black dot meant the area inside the buoys was only for swimmers.