

Sharks of Doheny: Learn about them and you're not so worried after all.

Ranger Jim Serpa

The dark green blood was oozing out of my right index finger in a steady stream just as I saw the 6 foot bull shark circling the small reef to my right. No, this isn't an excerpt from some macho outdoor magazine but the true account of my first experience with the animal we love to hate, the shark. It happened some 21 years ago, fresh out of High School, three friends and I had decided to experience what diving was all about and travel to the Bahamas. We were all just rookies, having been SCUBA-diving certified only a couple of years and never having dove more than an hour away from San Diego, let alone with sharks and barracudas.



Carl, my diving buddy, had just handed me a beautiful conch shell and I was happily swimming with it about 70 feet down around the edge of a magnificent coral outcropping, scanning the sea floor for another. All of a sudden I felt a sharp pain in the hand I was toting the large pink shell in. Looking down toward the conch I saw what was the largest Hermit Crab I had ever seen taking aim at another one of my fingers from inside the relative safety of the shell. Even at that age I knew better than to fight with large armored crustaceans and dropped the prize shell before the defensive Hermit could make his second direct hit to my digits. But unfortunately the damage had been done and now I was the happy possessor of a 1/2 inch long slice in my index finger. What made the experience so eerie was that I was down so deep that the short wave length of the color red could not penetrate, even here in the Bahamas and so I was watching what appeared to be dark green blood seep from the cut.

It was at this time that I spotted the Bull shark! Wow, my first shark, I

thought. It was only a millisecond later that I remembered my leaking finger and quickly grabbed a tight hold upon it to stop the bleeding. Here I was, miles from home, swimming in warm tropical waters, beautiful sea shells littering the ocean bottom and I'm bleeding like a stuck pig, as a large (to me) potentially dangerous shark cruises by. If it wasn't for bad luck I would have no luck at all. Every imaginable scenario went racing through my mind. Would I be attacked? Would my friends be attacked? Would the idiotic Divemaster who had brought us to an ocean where sharks were to be found get his just desserts? And finally, would I ever find another conch shell so pretty again? Well, to my amazement the shark paid little or no attention to me and my finger or anyone else in my group and as suddenly as it had appeared it was gone.

Since then I have been fortunate enough to dive in many parts of the world with many different types of sharks and I am still find myself totally in awe of them, if not better informed about them. Nearly 350 species of sharks swim in the seas and Doheny and the surrounding area have their share. I would like to tell you folks a little about some of them.

Leopard Shark: This is one of the most abundant sharks in our area as surf fishermen will attest to. They are easily identified by their gray color with large dark spots or saddles across their backs. They are not aggressive toward people and prefer to dine on fish eggs sand dabs and shiner perch. Leopard Sharks can grow up to seven feet in length but rarely will you ever see them even up to six feet.



Horn Shark: This lethargic fellow prefers to prowl at night and can often be found in the same cave or crevice for months or years at a time. Horn Sharks have very blunt, almost comical heads, are brown or brownish gray with numerous small spots and possess a spine in front of each dorsal fin. This shark is on average about two feet in length but can grow as long as three feet.



This is another harmless shark as it's diet of sea urchins, worms, crabs and club anemones can attest.

Brown Smoothhound: This three-foot shark is another species that surf fishermen frequently catch and is characterized by its light brown color and rear section of the two dorsal fins which appear frayed. It prefers a sand or mud covered ocean floor. Brown Smoothhounds can be found just offshore and will often be found in schools. Their diet consists primarily of shrimp and crabs.



Thresher Sharks: You just can't confuse these sharks with any other local shark because of the incredibly long upper lobe of their tail fins. We have two species of Thresher Sharks in Southern California, the Common and the Bigeye Thresher. Colors can vary from brown to blue to black and can reach a length of 18 feet. Threshers are usually found far offshore and are a favorite catch of sport fisherman because of their excellent tasting meat.



Mako Shark: This fast swimming shark are some of the most impressive sharks to catch because of their propensity to leap out of the water as much as 20 feet. Makos are very sleek with pointed snouts, dagger like teeth and metallic blue coloring. Makos feed on fast swimming school fish like bonito, mackerel, tuna and even swordfish. Thought to be the fastest swimming shark, this species lives far offshore and can reach lengths of 12 feet.



White Shark: No discussion on sharks would be complete without mention of this great beast. Reported to grow up to 25 feet this large shark can sometimes be found in surprisingly shallow water. It has been known to attack divers, swimmers and bathers.



While Southern California does have some of these sharks in its waters, as evidenced by the recent attack off Point Loma, the major bulk of the population lives off north central California near Santa Cruz. The main reason for this is that the White Shark's main food source, marine mammals such as Elephant Seals, are found in large numbers there.

Of course there are many other types of sharks in Southern California, including blue sharks, angel sharks, swell sharks, basking sharks and a host of others. People should realize that most sharks pose no threat to man and play a vital role in the ecology of the oceans. Many populations of commercial sharks have been hunted to dangerous levels for not only their meat but for souvenirs as well. Until recently there was little or no regulation on shark hunting and only time will tell if these populations will recover. With recent medical research on sharks showing promise in such fields as cancer, we should be protecting these splendid predators, not wiping them off the face of the earth.