

White Sharks: *Jaws, as in Plural!*

Ranger Jim Serpa

Could this really be happening? Just days after a woman was killed off Avila Beach on central California coast by a huge White Shark, whites now have been sited right off San Onofre State Beach.

Yes, it is true. Last August I was sent down to trail one at San Onofre to help Lifeguard Supervisor Steve Long with the army of reporters and public that



were descending upon the area after at least four white sharks were spotted hanging out in the surf zone there. I first heard about them from the coconut telegraph on Monday August 18th, my day off. We were on our way to San Diego to visit relatives but I had

to stop by to see if there was really a cause for the commotion. Well there they were, in all their glory. Not one, but two were visible in water not 100 yards off the beach!

Needless to say I was there for about an hour, much to the dismay of my understanding wife, Debbie, who was assured by me that we would just stop by for five minutes to take a look. Commitments took precedent and we were off to San Diego, at least in body for me while my mind lingered on those bluffs.

Early the next day I contacted John McCosker, noted White Shark expert at the California Academy of Science in San Francisco. I asked him what his opinion was about the sharks and if he had any suggestions for us. He wasn't buying any of the "buried whale theories." McCosker said "we have more buried whales and more white sharks and they are not hanging out in

the areas we have buried beached whales.” He also said that it was highly unusual for these sharks to be hanging out on the surface for long periods of time so “who knows.”

After talking with McCosker for about a half an hour I was summoned to San Onofre to assist Steve with the education of the public and news media. Much to my surprise, there were now at least three sharks, and possibly four. They all seemed to be about the same size, around 7 to 8 feet. They were not bothered by the crowds in the least. In fact, it was just the opposite. Several surfers had decided to swim out and surf the area. Do you really need to ask why? Instead of just swimming in the area near the surfers we actually started to see the sharks starting to take an interest in the surfers who, by the way, came in as soon as the sharks started to do so. At this time we decided that it was in everyone’s best interest, sharks as well as people, to keep the

public out of harms way if possible. If the sharks were spotted we were to ask the surfers to exit the water. Sounded logical to me. Granted, these sharks don't normally feed on such large prey, but they don't usually hang out in these numbers and proximity to shore and the surface either.

Most understood. Notice I say most, on Thursday, while stationed at the bluff top a woman and her friend came walking from the parking area with an oceangoing kayak. I told them that we had seen the sharks and we were advising people to go elsewhere today for their recreation. She told me that it was "OK" that's the reason she had driven all the way up there from San Diego, so that she could paddle with the sharks. I told her, sorry, not here. This banter went on for a few minutes with the couple finally leaving. About 45 minutes later I was talking with Steve Long on the bluff when we spotted the woman 1/4 mile south paddling up to where

she had just been told to stay away from!
No sooner did the woman reach the “shark infested waters” off trail one than she did a flip in the surf, lose her kayak and watch it float to shore as she thrashed around in the surf zone -- all this where the sharks had been a couple of hours previous. Yikes! Steve Long was already down on the beach as she came in. My guess is that she probably would have rather dealt with the sharks than Steve. People will never fail to surprise you.

Anyway, to make a long story short, the sharks disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. By the end of the week the sightings were pretty much over.

Why had they come? We're not sure. Maybe, diet, migration, hanging around mom, smelling dead whales. The hypotheses are endless!

How many were there? At least 4, maybe 5. I know I saw four at a time once and possibly twice. We never saw the 17-foot “Big One” that Marine Pilot Eddie Fox claimed he saw and took a picture of. The problem with the photo is that it has no frame of reference to gauge the size of the shark.

How big were they? The ones we saw were in the 7 to 8 foot range. A five footer washed ashore dead at Surf Beach a couple of months later.

Was this the first time we have seen them? We have, from time to time, seen sharks in the general area for years. An eight footer washed ashore about six years ago at trail four. I have the jaws from that one. After all, that is the open ocean, and a pretty healthy one at that, down in that neck of the proverbial woods.

Were they dangerous? Eight-foot white sharks should always be given the respect they deserve no matter what their “customary” dining preferences are, especially when they are acting in a way that is not normal.

We never saw them here at Doheny but then we have other issues to worry about now don't we? I can't wait until next summer to see if they come back. Of course, with fee increases on their way I may be a bit busy next August.

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