

Great white sharks

Everyone has a great shark story. And that dum dum dum dum.....dum dum dum dum music – Stephen Spielberg and Jaws have a lot to answer for.

Someone always knows someone who's been 'this close' to the mouth of a Great White.



Every summer the media love to sell the idea that we are shark bait waiting to be taken.

Humans have just about wiped out every large 'monster' capable of killing us. The Great Whites and Salt Water Crocodiles remain. It's a headline when some poor bloke is mauled to death. It's not such a great story when another dies in their sleep. As they say in media land, 'if it bleeds, it leads.'

Great Whites are big animals, reaching lengths of up to six metres and weighing up to 3,000 kg. When we look, all we see are big mouths with lots of teeth.

The reality is rather different. They have a gentle inquisitiveness, fantastic cruise control and are awe-inspiring sea creatures. Great Whites are fast and strong and much more adept in the water than any human will ever be.

They are also one of the oldest creatures on our planet, living fossils, in fact. Sharks have been around for far longer than us. Sharks go back 450 million years and survived five mass extinctions – they must be doing something right. Humans have only been around for 200,000 years. It turns out that Great Whites are an unknown and misunderstood species.

We know very little about their breeding cycle. Scientists believe that females may produce between five and ten young (pups), which are 1.2 to 1.5 metres long at birth and can weigh up to 32 kg. They think that these pups are fully developed and totally self-sufficient at birth.

We know very little about where they go or what they do. In Australia, Great Whites have been recorded from Moreton Bay in Queensland, around the south coast of Australia, and over to West Cape in Western Australia. There are many projects underway to monitor them to hopefully find out more about these mysterious creatures.

We know a little bit about what they like to eat. Young Great Whites feed on squid, fish, stingrays and other sharks, while the bigger ones change their diet to include marine mammals (seals, sea lions, dolphins, and dead whales). Oh, and the odd human!

There is no point pretending that this doesn't happen. The reality is that people and sharks occasionally find themselves in the same place at dinnertime. Shark attacks are very rare. The truth is, despite the millions of hours that millions of people spend in the ocean, you're five times more likely to get struck by lightning than find yourself in the jaws of a Great White. Despite its spectacular nature hardly anyone has a lightening story.

But we don't eat Great Whites, do we? Not generally although we do eat lots of other sharks (their fins mainly for soup) and have reduced the number of large sharks by 90%. Up to 100 million sharks are killed every year – this alters the balance of the food chain.

The problem is that we eat a lot of the same foods as Great Whites. Overfishing is the single biggest threat to our Great Whites. Our appetite for fish is not just threatening the fish we eat but also those species that also eat fish. Great Whites are now classified as endangered. It's all connected.

Overfishing isn't the only threat to our Great White Sharks. The other big threats to sharks include entanglement in nets and fishing gear, toxic contamination, water pollution and habitat degradation.

So what can you do? We've found out a few things that you can do to help.

- The easiest thing you can do to help save our sharks in is to keep our environment clean! Purchase biodegradable and chemical-free products that do not harm our environment, and support recycling efforts to keep harmful materials like plastic from entering the water supply.
- Never throw used fishing line, nets and hooks in the water. This entangles and kills birds, fish, turtles, dolphins, small sharks and whales.
- Volunteer with local community groups to clean storm drains, Adopt A Beach, or monitor the water quality of local watersheds. Organise your classroom, school club, or organisation to clean litter from rivers, creeks, estuaries, and beaches.

Don't worry too much about sharks when you're having a swim. We kill them by the millions. They kill a handful of us each year. Use caution when swimming at dawn and dusk near seal colonies. This is where and when Great Whites feed. Spread the truth about sharks. They need our help. Stop the rare fatal attack covering the facts.

Great Whites are a magnificent species playing a vital role in our oceans. We must work to protect these incredible species. Without them, our lives and life in the ocean will be a much poorer place.