

Love of Sharks; by Lenny Gallo

People have often asked me why I am so fascinated with sharks and where my passion for this “man-eating machine” comes from. Individuals are often trying to delve into my psyche—trying to make sense of something that seems so foreign and against the grain. I wish I could give these people a neat and compact explanation. Like most, the first time I saw a shark was in *Jaws* when I was very young. I remember being mesmerized—wanting to know and understand Bruce versus running out of the water in terror like most. I was captivated, and from that moment, I found myself emerged in trying to understand their way of life. Since then, it has been my hope to reflect my passion onto others—helping people see the allure and elegance in this creature, and why these fish warrant saving.

Like them or not, sharks are a valuable part of our ecosystem, and without them, our oceans and planet could not survive. Acting as the Grim-Reapers of the sea, they play a vital part in maintaining coral reefs by eliminating weak and sick species so that strong, controlled populations can thrive. It amazes me that we accept this concept with other predators, but that we judge sharks for eating the “poor seal.” Cats are some of the most common natural predators that we see in everyday life, yet people barely flinch when they kill mice or birds. Without the shark, certain populations of fish, rays, and seals can get out of control wreaking havoc on the ecosystem and economy. Yes, sharks do have an impact on the economy. From ecotourism to the sushi on your plate, little of it would be possible without the shark. When they are eliminated from the ocean, we see the consequences.

Since 1928, North Carolina was responsible for providing the east coast with scallops from its’ fisheries. In the early 2000’s sharks were fished out of the area which allowed the sting ray populations to flourish and dominate. In 2004, with the abundance of rays in the North Carolina water, fishermen were only able to bring in 150 pounds of scallops for the entire season. This forced many of the fisheries to close. Fortunately, with the help of local marine biologists, and some good legislation, sharks were able to regain strength in the area causing the ecosystem to come back into balance which allowed fisheries to reopen their doors in 2015. Even with data suggesting that saving sharks is a good thing, getting people excited about saving sharks is difficult. Mainly because sharks...well, sharks bite people.

The menacing biting qualities of sharks make conservation difficult. Yes, sharks do bite people, but they do not eat people. It is very rare for a shark to consume a human and scientists are still conflicted on why this happens. The most commonly accepted Scientific Theory generally goes like this: they see us floating on the surface and they mistake us for some other version of prey. When they bite a human—also known as a “test-bite”—they soon realize that we’re not what they normally eat, and they release their grip. Sometimes they may test-bite a couple of times before they realize we’re not prey (Imagine if you were blindfolded and had to feel something and identify the object in your hands. You might play with it and feel all aspects of it for a moment before you were able to understand what it was you were holding.).

Unfortunately, this test bite from a shark can lead to death. Most people who die of shark bites die from blood loss. While this is a tragedy, of course, the amount of people who die due to shark bites is minute compared to the number of sharks that die at the hands of humans. The news likes to sensationalize the shark attack stories each summer, but the reality is that getting attacked by a shark is rare and dying from a shark bite is even more rare. In 2018, 66 unprovoked attacks were reported worldwide and four of those attacks resulted in death. To put things into perspective, in 2018, 1.33 million people had deer related collisions in the US alone and 200 of those people died.

Every day you get out of bed (and even before you get out of bed), you put yourself at risk for death from just about everything you do. Dying from a shark-attack plays on unrealistic fears of uncertainty and abandonment in our subconscious, but in reality, most of us are not at risk for death-by-shark. Surfers—people who are truly at risk for shark attacks—understand the risk they put themselves into every time they step in the water. The needless fear is unwarranted. Unfortunately, *Jaws*—and movies like *Jaws*—did not do anything to help the matter and it's a double edge sword. On one hand it made weirdos like me curious about sharks, but on the other hand, it created a culture of people who feared them.

Peter Benchley was interviewed on the writing of *Jaws*, and he stated that he wished he had never written the book because of what it did to people's views of sharks. He stated: "If you bought into the fact that you had this rogue, cold-blooded killer going around hunting humans, then obviously anything you could do to stop those sharks was good. It provided cover for people who simply wanted to go out and kill sharks under the guise of somehow making people safer, which there's no evidence that was the case at all." He also stated that the book and film stifled conservation efforts for a long time because of this mentality.

Over the years, I have gotten to see numerous sharks in various environments. In 2015, I got the chance to cage dive with the great whites and explore these fish more in depth. Getting to peer into the eye of a Great White (which is actually a blue iris with a black pupil, not a solid black eye as we often see on TV), I saw more than just an eating machine. There was a cognitive process that was anything but simple, and dare I say it, a soul. I saw and felt their value in the chain of life; their greatness.

Perhaps sharks possess some fierce, strong quality, like stealth and power, that I wish I had in myself. Perhaps I was a shark in another life. Perhaps I'm a sociopath and sharks are able to do my bidding. Perhaps my fervor and passion stems from my own struggles with tolerance and acceptance. Whatever the reason is for my connection with these fish, one thing I am certain of is that I've always identified with the outcasts of society and have always fought to normalize the misunderstood. I encourage you to find your own outcast animal to help save, because every creature on this earth contributes in some way to keeping our planet functioning. If you are moved by sharks the way I am, please consider donating to Oceana. They are a wonderful organization that helps all of the world's oceans and they have specific campaigns just for sharks.