

SAVING JAWS

by Emily Mohlmann | illustration by Lee Fitzgerald

Sharks. They cause hearts to pound, fear to spread, and people to run. Thanks to films like “Jaws,” “Deep Blue Sea” and “12 Days of Terror,” sharks have gained a bad rap, but as an apex predator they are animals that need our help in conservation.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has assessed 307 shark species, 50 of which are listed as vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered. Out of all marine wildlife, sharks hold the greatest percentage of the IUCN’s Red List of threatened species. To give you a sense of scale, since 1972, the population of bull shark and hammerhead populations have fallen by 99 percent.

Adding to the problem, sharks have remarkably long gestation periods, with the frilled shark taking 3.5 years. Additionally, most sharks only give birth to one or two pups, which can take over seven years to reach maturity. All of this combined makes it difficult for shark populations to recover from overfishing. As Ransom Meyers, a marine biologist at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, noted, “If you go to any reef around the world, except for those that are really protected, the sharks are gone. Their value is so great that completely harmless sharks, like whale sharks, are killed, for their fins.”

One of the easiest things that can be done to aid in conservation is education. By teaching people across the globe that sharks are not out to eat them and are vital to the ecosystem, we can begin to save them. While television programs like those featured during Discovery Channel’s “Shark Week” aim to educate and inform, they also do harm with shows like, “Day of the Shark 3” and “Shark Bite Beach.” These shows profile shark attacks and in turn only feed the fear of sharks.

In 1916, a shark killed two people and seriously injured another in Mattawan Creek, N.J., and just days before two more were killed off the Jersey coast. This incident triggered a massive shark hunting expedition in New Jersey. Gunfire and explosives washed over the Jersey shore, killing thousands all in hopes of



catching *one* fish. Little did they know that, on average, sharks kill only 10 people worldwide each year; and you have a greater chance of being struck by lightning than being bitten by a shark. The 1916 attack changed public perception forever, inspiring “12 Days of Terror” and serving as the basis for “Jaws.”

The shark fin trade and hunts for “man-eaters” have devastated shark populations.

Today, over 100 million sharks are killed each year, mostly for their fins. In 2010, Congress passed the Shark Conservation Act, which bans shark finning in United States waters. This was a major improvement from just two years before, when shark finning was still legal and the only requirement for fishermen was to land both a shark’s body and fins.

But more needs to be done. The United Nations Law of Sea Convention requires any member country with a coastline to create laws that regulate fishing. Shark finning actually violates the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization’s Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and goes against their International Plan for the Conservation and Management of Sharks. Some countries will not adhere to these policies, so the most

recommended compromise is to require fisherman to land the body of the shark, along with the fins. This would make it illegal to be in possession of only shark fins, and at the same time, limit the amount of fins they could fit on a boat. While compromise is a step in the right direction, any fishing of sharks could lead to damaging effects.

As apex predators, the decline of sharks is detrimental to the ocean as a whole. The effects are already apparent; along the East coast, shellfish populations and water quality are declining due to the near extinction of blacktip and tiger sharks. Shellfish filter the water, and the big sharks eat and control the populations of smaller sharks and other animals that consume the shellfish. Without this natural balance, the smaller animals over-consume the shellfish, restricting food supply for humans. In tropical ecosystems the decline of tiger sharks is reducing the number of tuna, because the sharks are not around to eat the tuna’s main predators. Similar scenarios will play out across the world if something is not done now to protect the sharks. **R**

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