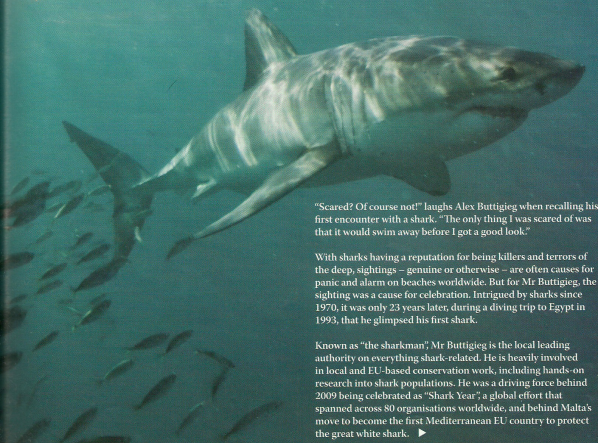


WHAT LIES BENEATH

THE WORD 'SHARK' IS ENOUGH TO STRIKE TERROR TO OUR HEARTS **BUT INCREASINGLY IT IS SHARKS WHICH ARE COMING UNDER ATTACK FROM HUMANS.** NESTOR LAIVIERA TAKES AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT A MUCH-MALIGNED SPECIES

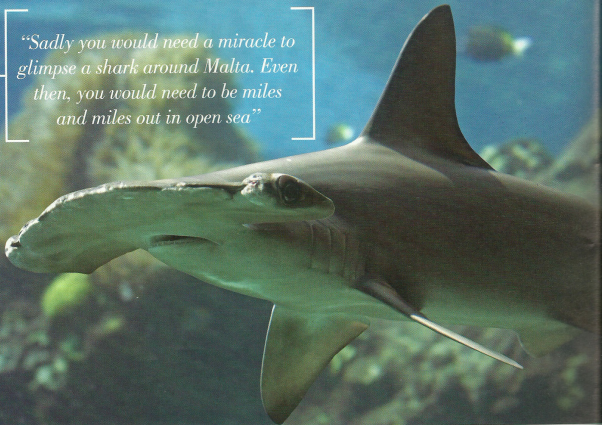


"Scared? Of course not!" laughs Alex Buttigieg when recalling his first encounter with a shark. "The only thing I was scared of was that it would swim away before I got a good look."

With sharks having a reputation for being killers and terrors of the deep, sightings – genuine or otherwise – are often causes for panic and alarm on beaches worldwide. But for Mr Buttigieg, the sighting was a cause for celebration. Intrigued by sharks since 1970, it was only 23 years later, during a diving trip to Egypt in 1993, that he glimpsed his first shark.

Known as "the sharkman", Mr Buttigieg is the local leading authority on everything shark-related. He is heavily involved in local and EU-based conservation work, including hands-on research into shark populations. He was a driving force behind 2009 being celebrated as "Shark Year", a global effort that spanned across 80 organisations worldwide, and behind Malta's move to become the first Mediterranean EU country to protect the great white shark. ▶

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He is also an avid diver, travelling all over the world to swim with sharks in their natural habitat. “Sadly you would need a miracle to glimpse a shark around Malta. Even then, you would need to be miles and miles out in open sea,” he says. I try to nod sympathetically.

Aside from the smaller species of sharks such as dogfish and smoothhounds (known as *mazzola*) that tend to grow to lengths of up to one-and-a-half metres, Mr Buttigieg explains how Malta’s waters are ill-equipped to host local shark populations. “We have nothing to support larger sharks permanently – we do not have reefs to sustain those species that are territorial. As a result, what larger sharks we get are migratory – passing through as they follow tuna shoals into the Mediterranean.”

Local bays and swimming spots are equally shark-free, he maintains. Those larger Mediterranean sharks that could conceivably pose a threat to swimmers are migratory and follow tuna shoals far out at sea, rarely

venturing inland, he says. “Shark attacks are nearly impossible.”

Many of the myths that surround sharks are unfounded, says Mr Buttigieg. “It is not human blood that attracts sharks, it is fish blood,” he explains, citing studies in controlled environments that demolish the age-old myth. He also points out how shark attacks are globally few and far in-between. “Hippos kill more people each year than sharks, although you can see what a fearsome reputation they enjoy,” he laughs. Even the only local shark-related killing, Jack Smedly, a retired British serviceman who was reported killed by a shark in 1956, was highly suspect, he points out.

What few shark species make the Mediterranean their home, over-fishing has depredated to critical levels. “20 years ago, fishermen would land six to eight hammerhead sharks every week. Today, more than two in a single year is considered plenty.”

He dismisses rumours of sharks living around Fila. “I’ve dived there for years, and the only time I saw one – an angel shark – was during a documentary shoot in 2007.”

Founder of Sharklab Malta and co-founder of Sharklab Global, Greg Nowell also explains how sharks are under serious threat from overfishing – both local and international. Globally, he explains that shark populations have come under attack because of “finning” a practice where shark fins are removed, while carcasses are discarded.

“Relatively recent economic shifts in China meant that more and more people could afford to eat Shark fin soup – considered a delicacy – and demand for shark fins skyrocketed,” explains Mr Nowell. As the larger sharks that appear in the Mediterranean are migratory, passing through between May and September, the depredation of the Chinese finning industry had a considerable impact on local shark populations. ▶

BEHIND THE MYTHS



- According to Shark Alliance, a not-for-profit global coalition of conservation organisations, at least 36 species of sharks and 27 species of rays are found in the waters off Malta.
- In April 1987, an enormous great white shark, one of the largest ever caught, was landed in Malta. It was reported at between 5.6 to 7.3 metres.
- In a 2008 study titled "Loss of Large Predatory Sharks from the Mediterranean Sea", scientists reported population declines of 96 to 99 per cent for Mediterranean populations of hammerheads, threshers, porbeagles, makos and blue sharks over the last 200 years.
- Nearly 60 per cent of Malta's shark species are considered "threatened with extinction", according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), basking sharks, smooth hammerheads, gulper sharks, threshers, blue sharks are also considered "vulnerable".
- In 1999, Malta became the first EU country in the Mediterranean to protect the great white shark. Later that year, Malta also protected the basking shark and the giant devil ray.
- Two species of dogfish (*mazzola griza* and *mazzola tax-xewka*) are the main sharks targeted by Maltese fishermen, who employ longlines, bottom nets, and trawls.
- In 2005, spiny dogfish (*mazzola griza*) ranked sixth in Malta's total fish landings with 19 tonnes, according to Shark Alliance. In 2006, Malta reported a spiny dogfish catch of 20 tonnes. The species is classified by the IUCN as "endangered" in the Mediterranean.
- According to Shark Alliance, Maltese fishermen also took more than one tonne of "critically endangered" porbeagle sharks and angular rough sharks in 2005.
- Malta also reports catches of blue sharks, threshers, gulper sharks, smooth hammerheads and angel sharks.
- There are no Maltese, EU-based or international catch limits for blue sharks, makos, threshers, catsharks, rough sharks, smoothhounds, nursehounds and six-gill or seven-gill sharks.

Locally, he explains, finning is not an issue, but our sharks face other threats. While not delicacies, local dogfish and smoothhound species are heavily fished, despite not being specifically sought after by local fishermen. "In most cases, they tend to get dragged up along with other catches, and since there are no regulations against their catch or sale, they end up at the fish market."

Sharks tend to mature much slower than other fish, explains Mr Nowell. They also produce a small number of "pups" per litter – few as three to five generally. "Adding to that a longer-than-average gestation period for most species, what it boils down to is that sharks cannot handle the strain and population levels are dwindling fast."

Protection is necessary before population levels fall beyond the point of no return, emphasises Mr Nowell. "Instituting size-limitations on sharks caught and sold would necessitate that immature and pregnant specimens would be thrown back. Even deepwater sharks are far more adaptable to changes in depth, and stand a very good chance of surviving."

Given their position as apex predators, Mr Nowell points out how their disappearance from the food chain could have far-reaching repercussions. "If they are out of the picture, anything that they prey upon – and most sharks can eat almost anything – will see a surge in population. In turn, whatever those creatures prey upon will then have to support far too many predators. Eventually, they too will die out, along with the species that preyed upon them. The balance would be thrown completely out of track," he points out.

Keeping track of sightings is tricky, he explains. Almost always unconfirmed and not recorded, it is impossible to keep track of population levels by sightings alone. "What we often get are odd one-off reports of the occasional seasonal blue shark or a great white, but they are very rare."

Asked about the fabled breeding haven for great whites that supposedly lies somewhere inside an imaginary triangle between Malta, Lampedusa and Tunisia, Mr Nowell explains how, while the theory is plausible due to several deepwater trenches in the area that could support shark breeding, there has to date been no real sightings or evidence that supports this theory.

If there is one thing that sharks are, it is misunderstood, says "Sharkman" Buttigieg. Having dived and swum alongside sharks on many times, he explains that not once has he seen violent behaviour. "During a dive in South America, I even pushed away an inquisitive great white that was getting too close to my camera. He just swam around me." **South Africa not South America.**

One of his top responsibilities as a shark aficionado, Mr Buttigieg says, is showing people what sharks really are like. "During one particular cage dive in Fiji, a diver's mother wanted to accompany him at all costs, afraid that a tragedy might befall her son in her absence." He recounts how she spent the entire journey there in intent, absorbed silence, oblivious to her surroundings.

South Africa not Fiji. Diver's 80 year old Mother. "But once we got there, and the 'shark' cry went up, she rushed to the side to get a look. Enthusiastically, she asked questions upon questions, and, by the end of it, she would have gone down in the cage herself if only she knew how to swim," he laughs. "This is the true face of shark