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Sharks - beyond the myth

ISSUE 3
MAY 2026

Published By
VO Nr 2640

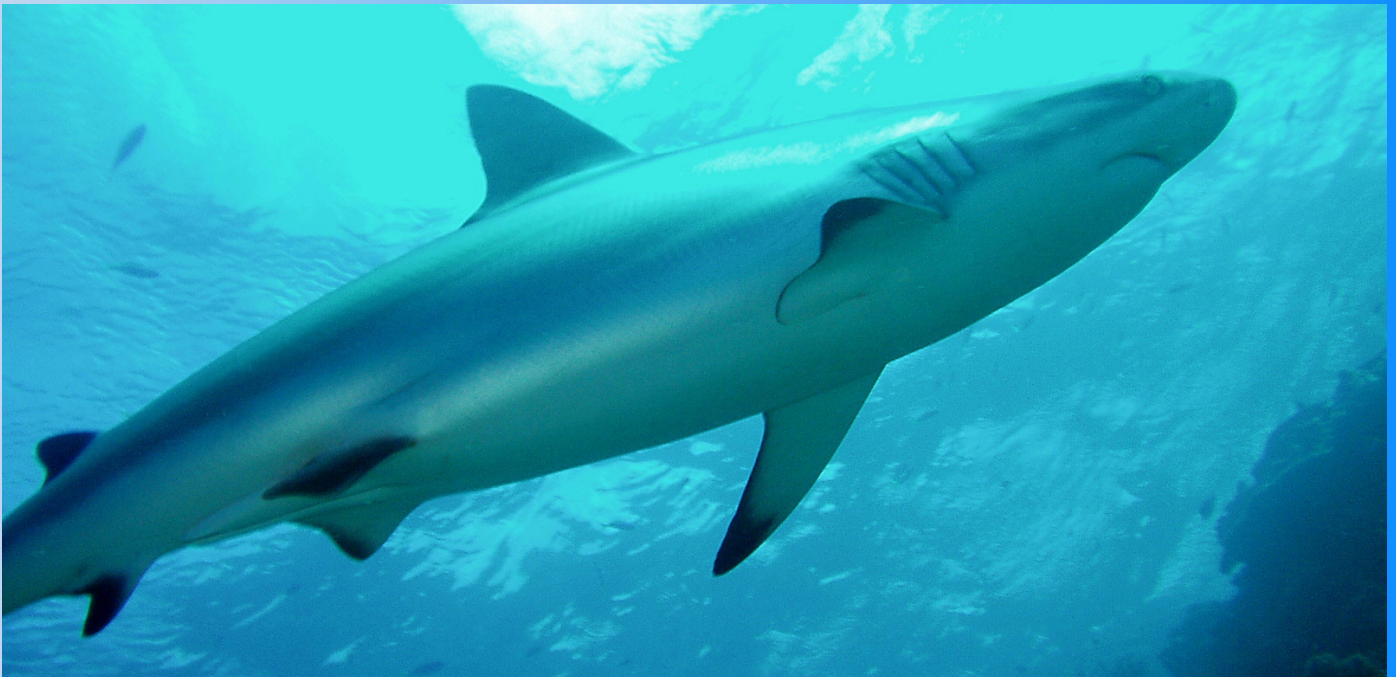


SHARKS - Beyond the Myth

Alexander "The Sharkman" Buttigieg - Sharkman's World

Sharks have ruled the oceans long before the dinosaurs ruled the earth. Most creatures have since become extinct, yet Sharks have continued to evolve and survive. Sharks have smooth, streamlined bodies, graceful movements, and a timeless presence shaped by millions of years of evolution. No wonder they are the ocean's top predators.

But how long will they survive? Will us humans allow such majestic creatures to survive?



Unfortunately these magnificent, mysterious and misunderstood creatures, have been wrongly perceived with images of shark attacks in the minds of many people. Like every other animal, sharks must hunt for their food to survive. Research has showed us that although Sharks are very good hunters, they can also survive for weeks without eating. There are over 556 different species of shark but only a handful are considered as a risk to humans. Shark attacks are very rare and there are reasons behind these attacks . Large shark species might attack because they mistake humans for their staple food (i.e. a surfer looks like a seal from below) rather than for their will of eating humans. Sharks might attack because they feel threatened when humans invade their breeding or hunting grounds. Sharks also bite when they investigate if an item is edible or not. The average annual number of Shark attacks is less than a hundred worldwide, and out of these, less than 8% are fatal. To put this in perspective, far more people are injured by dog attacks or by slipping on wet surfaces than by sharks. So Sharks are not the monsters that media make them out to be! There is minimal danger to humans but now let us look at the other side of the issue.

The Human Factor

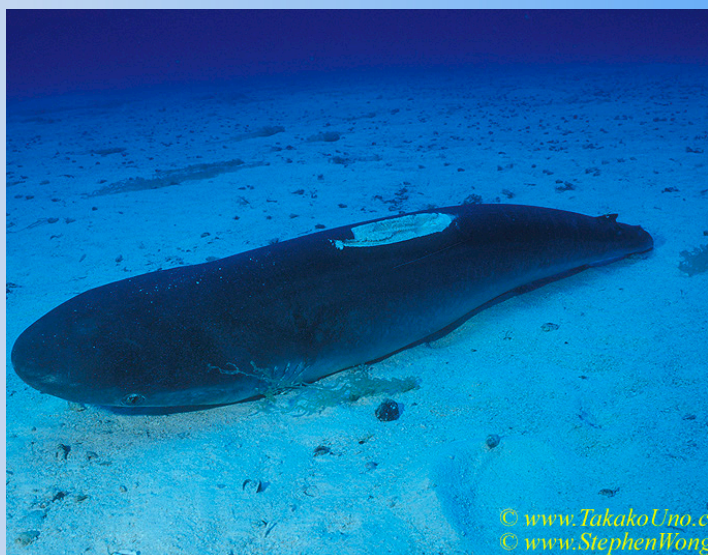
Most Shark species are now facing extinction due to the direct impact of human beings. Pollution, habitat loss and by catch by fishermen cause a large number of sharks to be killed worldwide.

But the major contributor to the sharp decline in shark populations world wide is over-fishing more specifically shark finning. Millions of Sharks are being massacred every year just for their fins which is than used for "Shark Fin Soup".

Sharks are being caught in their hundreds of thousands to have their fins cut off .The mutilated bodies are thrown back into the water for the sharks to die a slow and painful death. Sharks need water to flow through their gills to produce oxygen to live. Without fins, sharks suffocate.



Over 700,000 sharks are killed each year for shark fin soup, pushing many shark species on the brink of extinction. No shark species is left untouched. China, Indonesia, Japan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, are the largest consumers of Shark Fin Soup. With these countries becoming wealthier more people are consuming shark fin soup. The shark fin in itself is tasteless but adds texture to the soup and considered a symbol of wealth and status .



A number of Countries have already banned shark finning including the USA , EU etc and Shark conservation groups continue lobbying for a world wide ban . But shark finning is still happening. A huge illegal trade to satisfy this growing market is pushing prices for shark fins even higher making them more enticing for gangs and criminals.

Photos - Sharks without fins left to die a long painful death

Sharks mature very late in life (between 7 to 30 years) and that the reproduction cycle can take as long as 2 years. So their reproduction rates are very low. Shark populations cannot sustain such an onslaught and is pushing Sharks on the verge of extinction. Also other large amounts of sharks are being caught as a bycatch by fishermen, plus others end up in Aquariums and do not survive for long. Something needs to be done and we have to act fast.



Photos: Illegally caught Shark Fins. How many sharks would that be ?



It was for this reason that I set up Sharkman's World Organization (on <https://www.sharkmans-world.org/>) back in 1997, to raise awareness towards Shark Conservation issues. The first results came when in 1999, Malta became the first European country to pass laws to protect both the Great White and the Basking Sharks.

Why are Sharks important?

Sharks are vital for healthy oceans. As one of the top predators they keep fish and some mammals populations balanced ensuring no fish/mammals populations can grow out of proportion and causing other species to disappear. By eating the weak and sick, sharks help keep species strong. Sharks also protect habitats like seagrass and reefs by preventing overgrazing. Their presence gives ecosystems time to recover. Without sharks, the marine ecosystem can become unbalanced causing many species of fish we consume to become extinct



Photo: Shark Egg Purses

What is being done locally?

Over the years, the number of locally protected sharks has increased to 13 species. This was achieved with the great help of Sharklab Malta, an NGO set up in 2007 to create more awareness on the local scene. Sharklab Malta's work is leaving a huge impact on Shark conservation not only in Malta but also internationally.

During a visit to the Fish market in 2011 an encapsulated egg from a dead Smaller spotted Catshark female was recovered. After being placed in a small aquarium, the egg began to develop. And so did a new idea ... to actively remove eggs from landed dead pregnant sharks, cultivate them in small aquariums and after hatching release them back into the sea where they belong.

This new project had its first positive results when in 2013, Greg Nowell and his team, in collaboration with the National Aquarium, released the first Catshark. To date, 380 shark pups have been successfully breed and released.

How can we contribute?

You can also help make a difference!!

We need a lot of help from those that are willing to take this challenge with us. Sharks have been labelled as Monsters and Man-eaters for a long time, and to convince the right people to pass laws for Shark Protection, takes a lot of hard work.

Here are some of the things that you can do:

- 1) Help us spread the word that Sharks need to be protected.
- 2) Help dispel the Monster and Man-eater image that the media love to show.
- 3) Stop eating Shark food products.
- 4) Stop buying Shark items like real Jaws, Shark teeth or Shark leather items.
- 5) Support Shark Awareness and Conservation Issues World-Wide.
- 6) Support and Join Organizations like Sharklab – Malta.

It is up to people like us to protect these magnificent creatures before it is too late.

Alexander "The Sharkman" Buttigieg

Sharkman's World

More information can be found on <https://www.sharkmans-world.org/>



Whale Shark (Photo by Adrian Sultana)