

Cause of death in shark attacks rarely as clear as Olowalu fatality

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Staff Writer

WAILUKU — Though there have been 36 documented fatalities from shark attacks in the past couple of centuries in Hawaii, it is rare to be able to pinpoint the attack as the actual cause of death.

In most cases, said a zoologist who has compiled a list of known shark attacks since 1779, "no one this side of God knows which came first" in the majority of attacks. Many cases begin with someone being swept off shore, or falling off a boat. Did the person drown first, or did a shark cause the death? If a diver loses the mouthpiece of his breathing apparatus because a shark has grabbed his arm, and then drowns, is that a shark fatality?

These are the kinds of questions zoologist George H. Balazs faces as he continues to collect information about shark attacks as part of his job at the National Marine Fisheries Service.

He doesn't argue the point, but

simply gathers and lists any information he can find. The list now has 88 cases, with the death Tuesday of Martha Joy Morrell in an attack that, for once, appears to have been the clear cause of fatality.

The list shows that, with Mrs. Morrell's death, there have been 17 shark attacks on Maui and five on Molokai since the first recorded attack in 1779, against a Hawaiian surfer from the Big Island.

Of the total of 88 cases, 38 have involved a fatality, Balazs' list says. On Maui, six attacks have involved fatalities. Worldwide, there are fewer than 100 shark attacks per year, with a fatality rate of about one-third. Balazs found 37.5 percent of the cases he recorded involved a fatality.

Tiger sharks, suspected in the Olowalu attack, account for around 10 percent of those attacks where species identification was possible, according to marine biologist Frederic Martini. In his book, "Exploring Tropical Isles and Seas," Martini describes the tiger

shark as "the most unpleasant" of shark species.

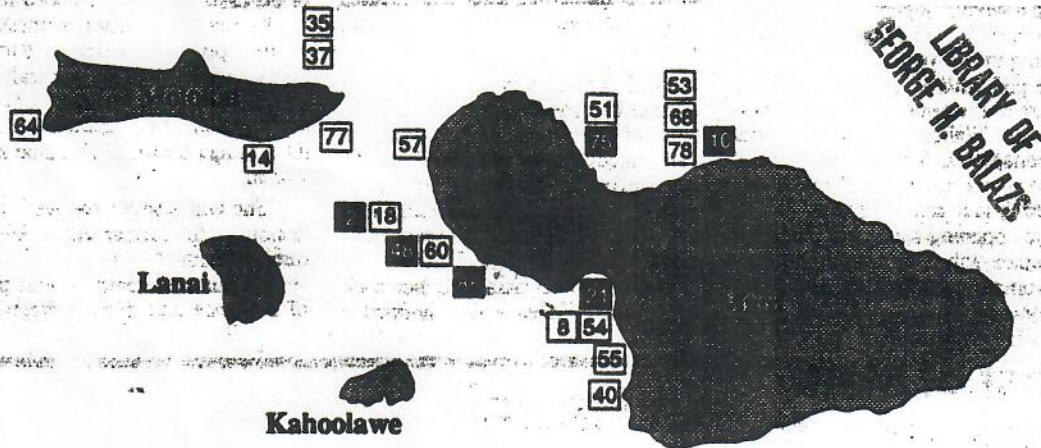
In an interview after a boogie boarder was bitten off Puamana in 1980, Martini said the tiger shark is "the second most dangerous shark in terms of attacks on humans. Tigers are particularly prone to take things off the top of the water." (The most dangerous is the great white shark, which is rarely seen in Hawaiian waters.)

Balazs wrote a letter printed in The Honolulu Advertiser June 13, 1990, agreeing with an earlier writer who said there seem to be more tiger sharks being seen close to shore. He said the most plausible explanation of this possibility is that "near-shore species of sharks in Hawaii, like tigers, haven't been fished for commercial or other purposes for a good 13 years or more.

"Tiger sharks are top-level carnivores, with very few natural enemies," Balazs wrote. "In the absence of fishing pressures, the population would be expected to build up."

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SHARK ATTACKS IN MAUI COUNTY



- 2 1828, Lahaina: Surfer killed by a shark; attack witnessed by a number of Hawaiian chiefs.
- 8 Oct. 8, 1907, Kalepolepo, Kihel: Man's arm amputated as he was retrieving fish caught in a net.
- 10 April 10, 1909, Pauwela: Woman reported to have been swept away while gathering ophi; searchers saw a shark devour what appeared to be a body.
- 14 Sept. 28, 1922, Keewanui, Kamalo: Male bitten while inspecting wharf.
- 18 Feb. 18, 1932, Lahaina: Sailor from the Navy vessel Saratoga bitten while swimming about 1 mile off Mala Wharf.
- 21 June 1943 (?), Maialaea: Soldier's shorts and an arm recovered from a shark caught at Maialaea.
- 35 1954, Molokai: Unprovoked attack; unable to determine circumstances.
- 37 Sept. 30, 1958, East Molokai: Man bitten on arm while swimming.
- 40 Feb. 27, 1960, Makana: Man attacked while spearfishing.
- 43 1960s (?), off Lahaina: Scuba diver passed out at 180 feet; about 30 large sharks seen near remains of body.
- 51 March 16, 1972, Wahee: Man bitten on leg while spearfishing.
- 53 Jan. 9, 1973, Hookipa: Surfer bitten on leg while close to shore; 4- to 6-foot shark observed in area.
- 54 Dec. 18, 1973, Kalama Beach: Man bitten on leg while swimming close to shore.
- 55 June 10, 1976, Kamaole Beach 1: Man bitten on foot and leg by 3- to 5-foot shark.
- 57 April 21, 1977, Kaanapali: Man bitten on arm by 4-foot shark while swimming close to shore.
- 60 Aug. 4, 1980, Puamana: Man bitten on left side of body while resting on boogie board 40 feet from shore; 14-foot tiger shark identified.
- 64 Nov. 9, 1981, Laau Point: Man bitten on hand while untangling crab trap from propeller.
- 68 June 13, 1982, Hookipa: Man bitten three times on the thigh after falling into water while sailboarding.
- 73 April 15, 1988, Wahee: Remains believed to be those of man lost at sea found along shoreline.
- 77 Jan. 20, 1989, Waialua Beach: Boy bitten by 6- to 8-foot hammerhead while riding boogie board 200 feet from shore.
- 78 April 3, 1989, Hookipa: Man bitten on calf while paddling surfboard in white water 50 yards from shore.
- 82 Nov. 26, 1991, Olowalu: Woman killed while swimming near Hekili Point.

THE INFORMATION IN THIS CHART WAS OBTAINED FROM A LIST COMPILED BY NATIONAL MARINE Fisheries Service zoologist George Balazs. The numbers in boxes indicate the order of occurrence in the Hawaiian Islands based on records beginning in 1779. Black boxes (■) indicate fatalities but do not necessarily mean the shark killed the victim. The victim may have died of other causes before the shark attacked. Question marks in parentheses mean the exact date of occurrence is not known.

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