

ARCHIE KALEPA photo

A large tiger shark, estimated at more than 20 feet long, was feeding on a dead sea turtle about a half-mile off Kahana in West Maui Thursday morning. While state conservation officers and Maui lifeguards warned people in the water of the feeding shark, no beaches were closed as the shark focused on

what it does best: cleaning up a large carcass in the ocean. Tiger sharks regularly include turtles in their diets although they are known to eat virtually anything, from slow-swimming puffer fish to other sharks to garbage. They also are suspects in most of the recent attacks on humans in Hawaii waters.

Large tiger shark spotted feeding off West Maui

By LILA FUJIMOTO
Staff Writer

KAHANA — Occangoers were reminded to be aware of their surroundings after a large tiger shark was seen feeding on a dead sea turtle Thursday off Kahana.

"This is the biggest shark I ever saw, and I've seen a lot of sharks," said Maui County lifeguard Capt. Archie Kalepa, who used a personal watercraft to get within about a foot of the creature.

"I would say it was 22 feet long. Guaranteed."

Kalepa and state Department of Land and Natural Resources officers responded to the area after a tour sailboat from the Hyatt Regency Maui Resort reported seeing the shark Thursday morning.

When he arrived, Kalepa said the shark was about 400 yards offshore and munching on the remains of the turtle as the carcass drifted toward the shore. But the turtle, followed by the shark, then started drifting out to sea until they were about a half-mile offshore, Kalepa said.

DLNR officers decided the beach didn't need to be closed, but they and lifeguards warned swimmers and kayakers within a two-mile radius of the shark's location.

Kalepa, who oversees county beach lifeguard operations in West Maui, said about one shark sighting a week has been reported in the Lahaina area dur-



ing the summer breeding season. Most of the sightings have been of smaller sharks, some close to shore, Kalepa said.

"This past month, we've had reports every day at Launiupoko," he said.

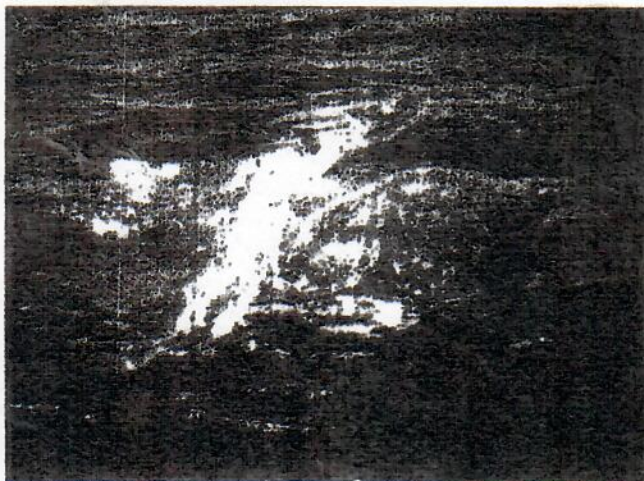
The sharks seen at Launiupoko are probably black tip or gray reef sharks," said Russell Sparks, education specialist for the aquatic resources division of the state Department of Land and Natural Resources.

"These are small reef sharks that probably pose little or no risk to people," Sparks said.

While two shark attacks were reported off Maui waters last year, the only two incidents reported this year were at beaches off Oahu, Sparks said.

On March 23, a shark bit the left hand of a bodyboarder off Sandy Beach. On April 11, a surfer at Ewa Beach reported being cut on his left hand, possibly by a shark.

Sparks said it wasn't surprising that the tiger shark was seen off Kahana because of the presence of the turtle car-



cass attracting the shark to the area.

A year and a half ago, large tiger sharks were drawn to the ocean between Molokini and Kahoolawe to feed on a large dead whale, Sparks said.

"That's kind of their role," he said. "If there's a dead carcass of anything, there's probably tiger sharks that are drawn in."

To reduce the risk of a shark attack, oceangoers should stay away from dead animals in the water and avoid swimming near people who are fishing or spearfishing, Sparks said.

"People shouldn't be terrified of the water, but should be aware," he said. "If there's a dead carcass or dead fish that might draw a shark, maybe you shouldn't go."

Other safety tips include staying out of the water at dawn, dusk and night when some sharks move close to shore to feed, and avoiding murky waters, harbor entrances and areas near stream mouths, channels or steep drop-offs.

Experts also recommend that people who have open wounds or are bleeding stay out of the water because sharks can

detect blood in very small concentrations.

People should also avoid wearing high-contrast clothing or shiny jewelry and refrain from excessive splashing that attracts sharks. Erratic activity of fish or turtles may be a clue to the presence of a shark.

If a shark is sighted, it's recommended that swimmers leave the water quickly and calmly and avoid provoking or harassing a shark.

When he approached the shark in the murky water off Kahana on Thursday, Kalepa said the shark was circling the carcass of the turtle, which had none of its flippers.

"He wasn't afraid of anything," Kalepa said.

Sparks credited lifeguards and DLNR officers for keeping an eye on the shark's activities Thursday and keeping people out of danger.

"The county lifeguards really do go above and beyond a lot of times in getting out there, monitoring the situation and helping keep people aware," he said.