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SHARK ATTACKS

THEY'RE MAKING HEADLINES, HERE AND AROUND THE WORLD.

HOW WORRIED SHOULD WE BE?

PG.10

THIS WEEK'S QUESTION:

Who's your favorite TV news person?

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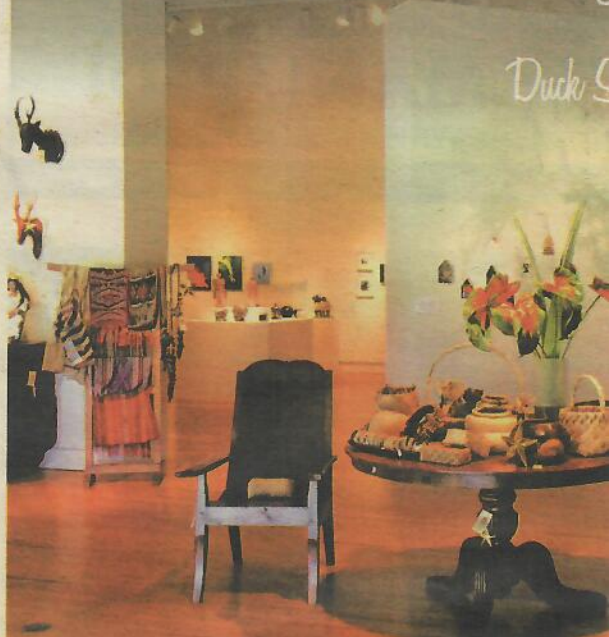


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SHARK ATTACKS

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HOW WORRIED SHOULD WE BE?

BY JACOB SHAFER

10 DECEMBER 19, 2013



maui time

MAUI, HAWAII

They come out of nowhere. Every shark bite story is unique but that's the thread that connects them all, like a trail of blood in the water. One second you're surfing, swimming, paddling, whatever, and the next you're staring down the wrong end of one of nature's most voracious killers.

Some get lucky, escaping with a few gnarly scars and the mother of all fish stories. Like Evonne Cashman, a 56-year-old retired teacher from Cerritos, California, who was snorkeling at Wailea's Uluva Beach this summer when a large shark clamped down on her back. She was able to swim to shore and was rushed to Maui Memorial, where doctors stitched a 15-inch gash along her spine; Cashman later told *KHON* news that one of the doctors estimated the shark was more than 25 feet long, based on the size of the bite.

"I didn't see him coming," recalled Cashman. "I didn't see him leave."

Others aren't so fortunate. Less than a month after Cashman's encounter, 20-year-old Jana Lutteropp of Germany lost her arm—and, ultimately, her life—to a shark in Makena. And earlier this month, Patrick Briney of Stevenson, Washington was bitten while fishing from a kayak off Makena Landing. He died before he reached land.

In all, there have been eight confirmed shark attacks in Maui waters this year, two of them fatal. That's higher than the average of about three attacks per year, and the fatalities are the first in nearly a decade.

What's going on? Is this an anomaly or

sharks. They are the apex predators of the sea; when we enter their domain we are at their mercy. And sharks don't show mercy.

So let's forget the math for a moment, or at least reframe the question: even if the odds are infinitesimal, is it possible sharks are becoming more aggressive toward people?

Archie Kalepa, renowned waterman and former Maui County ocean safety officer, thinks so.

"It's premature to say exactly what's going on, but this is definitely a concern to me," Kalepa said after the most recent fatal attack. "Something is going on."

Pressed for guesses, he cited several possible factors: an increase in the sea turtle population, a resurgence in tourists and therefore ocean users, even the deer swimming in the ocean. "All this needs to be looked at," said Kalepa. "[Sharks] are such powerful creatures, we need to show them a healthy respect."

Kalepa knows firsthand: he once swam

sanctioned shark "kill zones" on the country's west coast after six people were fatally attacked over a two-year span. The pushback from scientists and environmental advocates came fast as a great white on the prowl.

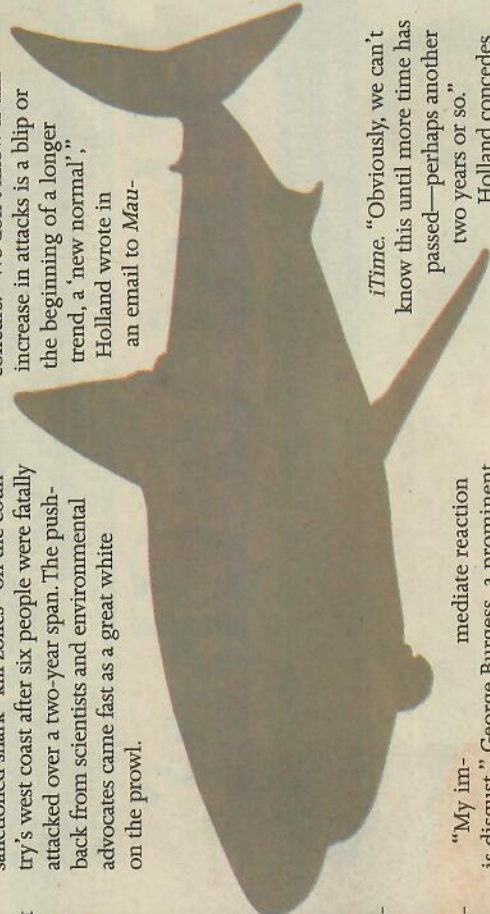
concur. "We don't know if this increase in attacks is a blip or the beginning of a longer trend, a 'new normal,'" Holland wrote in an email to *Maui-*

iTime. "Obviously, we can't know this until more time has passed—perhaps another two years or so."

Holland concedes that the recent uptick in attacks has come suddenly, emerging from a pattern of low attack rates. But, he argues, to prove cause and effect you have to show something else has changed, some contributing factor. A smoking gun. "I can't find one," Holland said. "The levels of spearfishing, the amount of shore fishing, commercial fishing, the underlying health of the reef ecosystem, the size of the turtle population, the number of visitors—all are pretty much the same today as they have been for the last decade or more."

Holland said he puts his money on the "blip" subsiding, but added, "If this is the new normal, we may have to rethink our current thoughts about shark behavior and management."

"Sharks are not man-eaters," Maui Rep. Kaniela Ima wrote recently on his website



"My immediate reaction is disgust," George Burgess, a prominent Florida shark researcher told *Nature*. "This is an archaic response to this kind of a problem, and one most scientists thought had seen its day decades ago."

[T]he odds of being chomped by a shark in Hawaii are one in a half-million. You're much more likely to be struck by

of them fatal. That's higher than the average of about three attacks per year, and the fatalities are the first in nearly a decade.

What's going on? Is this an anomaly or the beginning of a disturbing trend? And what, if anything, can we do?

The chances you'll be bitten by a shark on Maui, or anywhere else, are vanishingly small. Think about it: there are 1.4 million people living in Hawaii, and about five times that many visit our state each year. Assume only one-third of those people get in the ocean. Now assume there are around twice as many attacks as have been reported this year—say, 20.

Even with those generous assumptions, the odds of being chomped by a shark in Hawaii are one in a half-million. You're much more likely to be struck by lightning, killed by your neighbor's dog, drowned in the bathtub or a thousand other things you spend zero time worrying about. (By contrast, BBC reported earlier this year that humans killed an estimated 100 million sharks last year for their fins—Hawaii outlawed the sale of shark fin products in 2010.)

Still, all the numbers in the world can't erase the terror, the instinctive

drop in the stomach, that comes when you see a large, dark shape in the water. We are genetically predisposed to fear

million. You're much more likely to be struck by lightning, killed by your neighbor's dog, drowned in the bathtub or a thousand other things you spend zero time worrying about.

eyeball to eyeball with a 20-foot tiger shark off Kahana while it devoured a turtle. "It was an incredible thing, but at the same time reminds you what these animals are capable of," he said.

Kalepa said he could support culling sharks if the problem persists. "Native Hawaiians hunted the sharks," he pointed

out. "I know not everyone agrees, but when human life becomes involved, when the danger increases, there needs to be some level of protection."

"I say that," he added, "with a heavy heart." Killing sharks to protect people is always controversial. Earlier this month the Australian government approved the creation of

But if culling isn't the answer, what is? Right now, for Hawaii, it appears to be wait and see. And study.

In September the University of Hawaii and state Department of Land and Natural Resources began monitoring tiger shark activity around Maui to help determine "management options."

"Historically, October through December are the months when the rate of shark incidents increases," DLNR chair William Aila said in a release announcing the monitoring program. "This is part of traditional Hawaiian knowledge, reinforced by our own statistics. So we urge people to be extra cautious."

Still, Aila added, there's no cause for panic—yet. "These appear to be random events involving sharks of different species and different sizes," he said. "There's nothing we can yet discern that connects the incidents or provides any sort of explanation." Kim Holland, a UH shark researcher,

new normal, we may have to rethink our current thoughts about shark behavior and management."

"Sharks are not man-eaters," Maui Rep. Kaniela Ing wrote recently on his website. "They don't bite people because they are hungry. As [legendary surfer] Keoni Downing put it, 'When I'm hungry I don't just take a bite of musubi and put it back on the plate. I eat the whole thing.'" Still, when you've got a mouth full of steak knives, a nibble is all it takes.

So, Rep. Ing and other officials urge, we've got to exercise caution and use common sense. A flier released recently by Mayor Alan Arakawa's office runs down the familiar but easy-to-forget laundry list: don't enter the water with open wounds; don't swim in murky water, when it's raining or at dawn and dusk; don't swim near fishermen; don't swim alone. And, if it needs to be said, never provoke a shark, be it a massive tiger or an unassuming white tip.

That's another common thread among the attacks—in almost every case, the victim was doing something that upped the risk factor (besides simply getting in the water). Cashman, the California school teacher, was snorkeling by herself in low visibility. Most of us have done that at least a few times; but where most escape unscathed, Cashman paid the price.

Her reaction, though, is telling. "I hear it's very rare," she told a Los Angeles TV station after returning home. "It would have to be even more rare for it to happen a second time. I can't imagine not snorkeling again—and I don't want to be afraid of the water." ■

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