

# The true meaning of shark bait:

Capt. John "Jack" Young. It doesn't mince words when he talks about sharks.

"I hate the damn things," he says. "They're vicious."

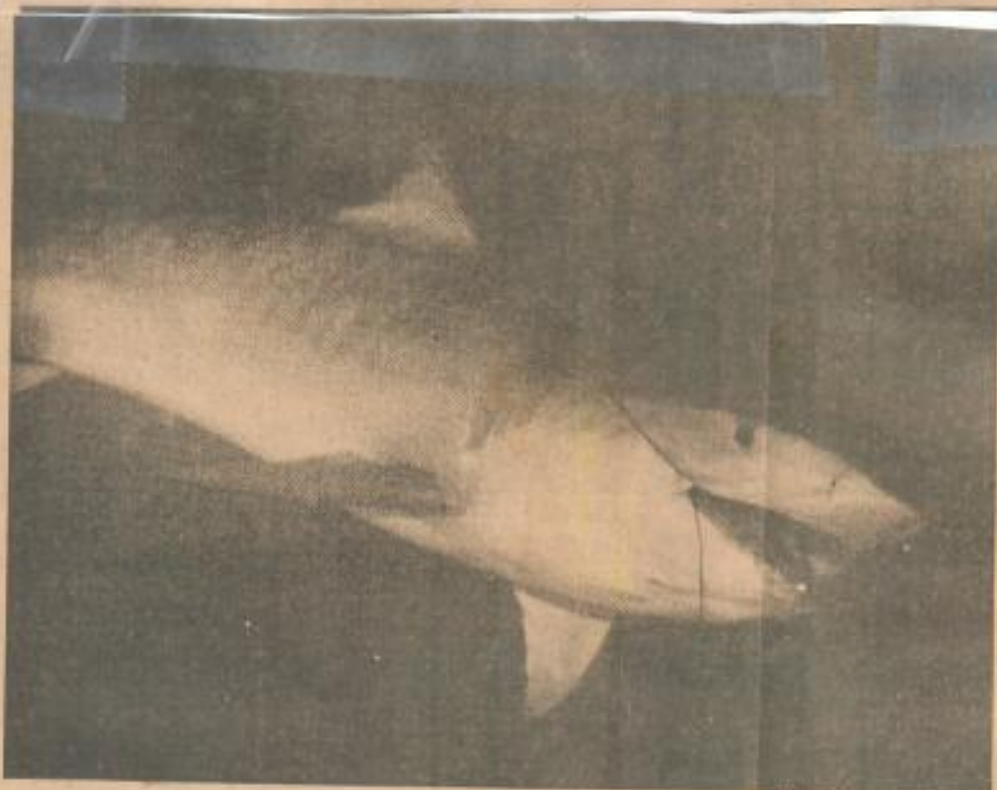
Young's father, John Sr., was a founder of the Young Brothers Barge Co. His uncle, Capt. William E. Young, was a world famous shark hunter during the 1920s, '30s and '40s.

Time and popular perceptions have changed since the days the Young brothers would take paying guests off Keehi Lagoon and harpoon large sharks for sport. Today there'd be an outcry if people were to shoot old horses on the waterfront as the Youngs did and then drag the bloody carcasses behind a boat to attract large sharks.

(The Youngs were not the only people who did this. In the Kohala region of the Big Island, sharks were killed using old horses and other livestock as bait through the 1950s).

"In those days, they didn't think there was much value to the shark," said Young, 72. "I only went out once when I was a kid . . . They (his uncles) had thrown the harpoon at one of the sharks and as the line played out I almost got caught in the damn thing. My father never let me go again."

Lowell Dillingham, 74, chairman of Dillingham Corp., also recalled going shark hunting with the Youngs when he was a small boy. He remembers being on a tugboat pulling a "very white, very dead horse" off Ewa Beach. The carcass — from a horse on its way to the slaughterhouse — was sliced so it would bleed and then left to drift until it attracted sharks.



Waikiki Aquarium photo

A tiger shark at bay.

The tugboat left the scene for a leisurely tour of the area, then returned when the carcass had attracted 10 or 15 sharks. Dillingham said he was too young at the time to react emotionally to what was happening and was uncertain what motivated people to go shark hunting — "whether it was hatred or some kind of sport." But he said few Hawaiians participated. Hatred sharks, he said, was something

"outside their experience."

"No, why should we do that?" asked Francis "Son" Hekekie, Honolulu fire captain and commercial scuba diver. He said that when he was growing up his parents taught him to respect and revere sharks, not to hate or fear them.

Hekekie said he doesn't approve of the hatred generated against sharks by recent books and films such as

# horses and humans



from  
the sea

mike markrich

"Jaws" and disapproves of killing them for sport.

"When I was growing up," Hekekia said, "we learned to think of the shark as our *amakua* (a personal family spirit) that looked out for us . . . All of us as children were always taught that man is more dangerous than a shark.

"Our parents would say to us, 'How many people die in the ocean due to shark attacks and how many due to attacks or murders by humans?'"

(According to the Waikiki Aquarium and the National Marine Fisheries Service, there have been 65 shark attacks in Hawaii recorded since 1886, 28 of them fatal).

The shark played an important role in Hawaiian mythology. Children were taught not to venture into the ocean when the red flowers of the wiliwili tree bloomed, for during that period sharks were said to be especially dangerous. People who captured sharks were thought to derive strength and bravery from their mana or spirit.

But for the most part sharks were left alone. They were an accepted part of the Hawaiian ocean environment and some were even tamed by Hawaiians as *undersca* pets.

There are stories, however, that certain Hawaiians of high rank did fish

for the niuhi or tiger shark from a canoe. Capture of the tiger sharks, which are among the most dangerous of all local sharks, was difficult and risky. According to several accounts, during the time of Kamehameha I, human beings were sometimes used to bait them — hence the modern expression, "shark bait."

According to the classic 1915 work by former University of Hawaii zoologist William Alanson Bryan, "The Natural History of the Hawaiian Islands," slaves were killed two or three days in advance of a fishing expedition and the flesh of the victims placed in a special container and allowed to decompose.

(It is important to view this in historical perspective. During the same period it was not uncommon for lower-class Europeans to be hanged or burned alive at a stake for minor infractions such as stealing a loaf of bread.)

The human bait would then be loaded onto an outrigger in a way that left a trail of blood in the water. The canoe would be paddled toward an area known to have sharks and the fishing, with special large hooks, would begin.

In more recent times, the organized killing of sharks has fallen into disfavor, says National Marine Fisheries Service biologist John Naughton.

Naughton, who participated in a two-year UH shark control program, said modern research indicates that killing sharks without purpose can be counterproductive. He said they are the top carnivores in the Hawaii ocean and are important in keeping a natural balance in the ocean ecosystem.