

Targeting Great White Sharks is Wrong

By Keith Ingram

Recently a major study carried out by an international team of researchers from more than a dozen countries revealed that sharks inhabit less than a third of the world's oceans. It found that sharks only thrive near ocean surfaces, and cannot be found below 3000 metres, because there is not enough food for them to survive at lower levels.

The finding represents a blow to researchers who have spent years scouring the deep for sharks and new species. Clearly there are also concerns about the diminishing number of oceanic sharks on our high seas. There has been a lot of coverage recently regarding one of our oceanic sharks, the great white. Unfortunately, as happens when mainstream media and environmental groups like Forest and Bird get involved, many important facts get lost in the emotions of creating a good story to bolster one's image.

The Minister of Conservation, Chris Carter, has risen to the occasion, as he is apt to do when it suits his eco' driven friends, and recently released a discussion document canvassing options for protecting great white sharks in New Zealand waters.

He states: "Great white sharks are the celebrity predators of the ocean. They are an object of fear and fascination, but sadly there is growing evidence that this magnificent and rare species is in trouble internationally."

In 2000, great white sharks were listed as "globally vulnerable" on the International Red List of Threatened Species, amid fears that accidental catch in some commercial and recreational fisheries was having a significant impact on numbers.

And yet he ignored the call in 2000 from the New Zealand Recreational Fishing Council to do something about it by banning the targeting and finning of oceanic sharks at sea. "Like many other top predators, populations of great whites tend to be small and lack the elasticity to withstand external pressures, such as fishing and environmental change," Carter says.

Our near neighbour, Australia, has already moved to protect the great white shark in its waters, but to date New Zealand has not, despite being a party to the International Convention on Migratory Species, which obliges us to do so. Great whites are also protected in South Africa and the United States. In releasing the discussion document, Carter says the government believes it is time we thought seriously about playing our part in what is a global conservation issue.

He intends to canvas the views and options of how we might go about meeting our international obligations for protecting the great white from the public and stakeholders in the marine area.

Without appearing to be a wet blanket, it is hard to argue with his spirit of intent. But Minister, a Bandid fix in our coastal waters is too little, too late. Instead of waiting for cosy support from the eco-ites, start listening to those who go down to the sea in ships, the professional mariners and recreational fishers. The problem is not just great whites, it affects all our oceanic sharks, including our mako.

"The recent media reporting on the exploits of two fishermen in Port Stephens only highlights the inappropriate behaviour of their actions in specifically targeting an endangered and protected species" said Frank Prokop, the President of Recfish Australia, in response to a recent reported catch. Recfish Australia represents the interests of anglers at the national level.

"We always encourage people to participate in fishing and enjoy the many rewards that it has to offer. But we also encourage people to fish within the rules and to understand that sustainable fishing is the responsibility of everyone who fishes." The great white shark has been listed as endangered and afforded protection by many countries around the world so that it may return to close to its natural numbers. It is for this reason that there is a ban on targeting these fish.

"It is clear from media reports that the two anglers are setting out to catch great white sharks, and we cannot condone that behaviour, thinly disguised as helping science or understanding the species, in any way."

Closer to home, a great white shark measuring almost 5m long has been caught seven nautical miles off Port Waikato on the western coast of the North Island. The female shark was caught by a commercial fisherman, Warwick Harris, from the fishing boat he operates out of Port Waikato. The catch was towed back to port and is being examined by researchers at Auckland University.

Warwick Harris says it is the biggest shark he has seen in his time in an area not known for great white sharks. He says its jaws are large enough to fit around a person's body. While not condoning this capture,

we should at least acknowledge that Mr Harris brought the shark in and handed it over for research, rather than go for the quick buck from selling the fins and auctioning the jaw.

This aside, I must address the amount of mis-information being touted by some. No game or sporting club I know of has trophy hunts for great whites in New Zealand. Granted, they remain on the books of the International Game Fishing Association and the New Zealand Big Game Fishing Council's records as a sportfish. I also understand these organisations are reviewing their policies, and they should be encouraged to do this openly and without prejudice. Barry Weeber of Forest and Bird's comments on television accusing the Chatham Islanders of hunting these sharks for their fins and jaws is total mis-information. Reference to the Chatham Islands must be taken in context with the situation.

Great whites hunt and eat seals. The Chatham Islands have prolific numbers of seals, including the New Zealand fur seal, a much-preferred food source for large, oceanic sharks and orca. And as such, the islands are a good feeding ground for sharks, including great whites. The local islanders catch these large, threatening sharks, great whites or otherwise, only in areas where and when paua divers are at risk while working to harvest paua quota, a legitimate activity. The point I am trying to make is that the number of great whites captured on the New Zealand coast is very small by comparison to those taken at sea or on the high seas.

The Conservation Minister risks causing further problems by enacting bad legislation causing public confusion. Already he has acknowledged that Dunedin will have to get a special permit for its beach shark nets. Does this mean that every amateur or commercial fisher will need a special permit before setting his or her net to catch food?

If Chris Carter really wants to protect our declining oceanic sharks, including great whites, he should address the problem at the source:

First. Ban the practice of finning sharks at sea, alive or dead. Introduce legislation which requires all shark fins from legitimately caught sharks, by-catch or otherwise, be landed attached to the shark's trunk, so that they are recorded both as by-catch or against quota held by the fisher.

Second. Ban the importing of shark fin products and trade in oceanic shark jaws.

Thirdly. Apply government pressure to those nations which encourage finning sharks at sea or on the high seas for the sole purpose of the dried shark fin trade.

Unfortunately the Minister's decision will once again make potential criminals out of normal, law abiding citizens, which is sad, because recreational fishers, and I would suggest most commercial fishers, actually support the high seas protection of our oceanic sharks, including great whites. Finally, for this to work, the Minister needs public support. His department has no means of effecting compliance, so without public support this decision will create meaningless rules.

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