

Human deaths from shark attacks hit 20-year low last year

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Fatal shark attacks worldwide dipped to their lowest levels in two decades in 2007 with the sole casualty involving a swimmer vacationing in the South Pacific, according to the latest statistics from the University of Florida.

Except for 1987, when there were no fatalities, the last year a single human death occurred from a shark attack was in 1985, said George Burgess, director of the International Shark Attack File housed at UF's Florida Museum of Natural History. By comparison, there were four deaths each in 2005 and 2006, and seven in 2004.

“It’s quite spectacular that for the hundreds of millions of people worldwide spending hundreds of millions of hours in the water in activities that are often very provocative to sharks, such as surfing, there is only one incident resulting in a fatality,” he said. “The danger of a shark attack stays in the forefront of our psyches because of it being drilled into our brain for the last 30 years by the popular media, movies, books and television, but in reality the chances of dying from one are infinitesimal.”

Advances in medical treatment, greater attention to beach safety practices and increased public awareness about the danger of shark attacks are all likely reasons the fatality rate so far for the 21st century, at 7.6 percent, has been lower than the 12.3 percent recorded for the 1990s, Burgess said.

The number of shark attacks overall increased from 63 in 2006 to 71 in 2007, continuing a gradual upswing during the past four years, he said.

“One would expect there to be more shark attacks each year than the previous year simply because there are more people entering the water,” he said. “For baby boomers and earlier generations, going to the beach was basically an exercise in working on your suntan where a swim often meant a quick dunking. Today people are engaged in surfing, diving, boogie boarding and other aquatic activities that put them much closer to sharks.”

Occasionally, the number of attacks may drop in a particular year because of changes in meteorological or oceanographic conditions that affect water temperature and salinity, such as the frequency of hurricanes and tropical storms, Burgess said. But scientists don't put too much stock in these year-to-year fluctuations, preferring to look at long-term trends, he said.

Traditionally, about half of the world's attacks occur in United States mainland and Hawaiian waters, but the proportion was greater in 2007, Burgess said. Last year's total of 50 attacks returned to 2000 and 2001 levels of 53 and 50, respectively, after dropping from 30 to 40 for each year between 2003 and 2006, he said.

Elsewhere, there were 12 attacks in Australia, up from seven in 2006 and 10 in 2005, but down slightly from the 13 attacks recorded in 2004. There were two attacks each last year in South Africa and New Caledonia, with single incidents reported in Fiji, Ecuador, Mexico and New Zealand.

There also was an upswing in attacks along the Florida coast, jumping from 23 in 2006 to 32 in 2007. There has been a gradual increase in human-shark skirmishes in the Sunshine State since they dropped from

37 in 2000 to an 11-year-low of 12 in 2004, he said.

Within Florida, Volusia County continued its dubious distinction as the world's shark bite capital with 17 incidents, its highest yearly total since 2002, Burgess said. Attractive waves off New Smyrna Beach on the central Atlantic coast are popular with surfers, he said.

Additional U.S. attacks were recorded in Hawaii – seven — marking a five-year-high, along with South Carolina, five; California, three; North Carolina, two; and Texas, one.

Fifty-six percent of the 2007 victims were surfers and windsurfers; followed by swimmers and waders, 38 percent; and divers and snorkelers, 6 percent.

Last year's Sept. 30 fatal attack involved a 23-year-old woman from France who was snorkeling off the Loyalty Islands archipelago in French New Caledonia and became separated from a friend, Burgess said. She was a nurse who had just finished a hospital contract in Noumea and was taking a brief vacation before flying home, he said.

“We advise not getting yourself isolated because there is safety in numbers,” he said. “Sharks, like all predators, tend to go after solitary individuals, the weak and the infirm, and are less likely to attack people or fish in groups.”

Last year had few spectacular attacks or heartwarming rescue stories, Burgess said. “It was mostly minor injuries,” he said. “There weren't too many made-for-movie moments.”

Source: University of Florida

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