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WA shark cull season ends, and ocean users don't want it to return

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WA shark cull season ends, and ocean users don't want it to return

Abstract

The end of April marks the end of Western Australia's shark cull – for now at least. Since January 25, dozens of sharks (the WA government has not yet released official figures) have been killed off popular beaches in Perth and the state's southwestern tip.

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WA shark cull season ends, and ocean users don't want it to return

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Wave of protest: surfers were among thousands who rallied at Cottesloe Beach against the Barnett government's shark cull.

AAP Image/Theron Kirkman

The end of April marks the end of Western Australia's shark cull – for now at least. Since January 25, dozens of sharks (the WA government has not yet released official figures) have been killed off popular beaches in Perth and the state's southwestern tip.

The WA government remains committed to the plan, having asked the Environmental Protection Authority for permission to carry on killing great white, tiger and bull sharks longer than 3m between November and April for the next three years.

Yet our research shows that most surfers, divers and other ocean users don't want the cull to continue. Instead, people favour improved education and ocean monitoring, and wider acceptance of the risks associated with ocean use.

Fierce protest

The state's drum line project is part of a broader shark hazard mitigation strategy, devised in the wake of several deaths attributed to sharks over the past three years.

But the strategy – and particularly the use of drum lines – has sparked fierce protest in WA, as well as across Australia and right around the world.

Some 4000 people rallied at Perth's Cottesloe Beach in January, while a nationwide series of demonstrations on February 1 drew about 6000 people to Cottesloe, with an estimated 2000 in Sydney and thousands more elsewhere.

Scientists around the world have spoken out about the unproven effectiveness of the approach and the toll on marine ecosystems of removing high-level predators.

Even relatives and friends of those killed and injured by sharks have joined the campaign against the cull.

Ocean-goers regularly meet sharks...

Many people have a view on the shark cull. Our research is focused on people who spend lots of time in or on the ocean, and are therefore the most likely people to encounter sharks.

As part of an ongoing project we carried out an online survey of 557 WA ocean users, including surfers, board-riders, divers, snorkellers, swimmers, paddlers, fishers and surf lifesavers.

Our survey asked questions around four themes: people's ocean use; whether they have encountered sharks; their attitudes and practices towards using the ocean given the existence of sharks; and their views on shark management and shark hazard reduction.

The results show that ocean users regularly see sharks. Of the respondents who answered this question, 69% had encountered a shark while undertaking ocean activities. "Encounter" here includes spotting from a distance, seeing at close range, and in some instances even physical contact. The range of species is broad, but includes the three target species. Of the 258 respondents who could confidently identify the species they met, 54% reported encounters with tiger sharks, 23% with white sharks, and 20% with bull sharks.

What's more, most of these shark encounters – including with the three species considered to pose potential danger to people – passed off without incident or injury. In other words, the presence of sharks does not necessarily equate to danger to people.

...but still oppose killing

The majority of respondents oppose hazard-reduction strategies that involve killing sharks. From a list of strategies we compiled from the WA government, marine scientists, ocean-user groups and the media, the most strongly opposed strategies were (in order):

baited drum lines

culling species identified as posing a threat to humans

wider use of shark nets

In contrast, the most strongly supported strategies were:

improving public education about sharks

encouraging ocean users to accept the risks

increasing warning systems

The WA government's cull is thus in direct opposition to the preferences of the majority of ocean users.

Importantly, the most strongly supported strategies relate to improving understanding and awareness of sharks, and people altering their own behaviour and practices in the ocean.

What next for Australian shark management?

As the debate continues, and the environmental impact assessment process begins, we argue that the experiences and views of ocean users provides an important source of information and should be taken into account.

Further, these and related findings should inform a new discussion about how we manage shark hazard in other parts of the country, such as Queensland and New South Wales, where kill-based strategies have been in place for decades.

Our ongoing work shows that people who use the ocean regularly are strongly supportive of learning more about shark behaviour and ecology through further research. To avoid unwanted encounters, many people pay careful attention to ocean conditions, avoiding times when visibility is poor and staying away from places where food sources are present, like seal colonies and schools of bait fish.

A better public understanding of sharks' migration, breeding and feeding patterns will help ocean users and beachgoers to feel more confident doing the things they love: being in the water.