



# Cape Cod: Expert says sharks, seals here to stay

By Doug Fraser The Cape Cod Times

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George Burgess, former curator of the International Shark Attack File, is shown at the Atlantic Wh... ▲

A former curator of the International Shark Attack File says responses to incidents are critical but great whites aren't to blame.

CHATHAM, Mass. — Last year, George Burgess predicted that a fatal shark attack would occur on Cape Cod within five years.

☰ “It’s the combination of a large predator, and the things they eat, both gaining in population size and both coming back to lay claim to areas that historically were theirs

150 years ago,” Burgess — then-director of shark research at the University of Florida and curator of the International Shark Attack File — said at the time.

Burgess, now retired after 40 years as a shark researcher and curator, was on the Cape last week to gather information for the shark attack file on the region's two shark attacks this summer, including one that resulted in the death of 26-year-old boogie boarder Arthur Medici. Burgess stressed his concern over the loss of life and his sympathy for the victim and his family, but said the Cape has now turned a corner and that beachgoers, the general public, and town, state and federal officials have to realize there is no going back. Sharks and seals are here to stay, he said, and signs point to continued expansion of their populations.

"Considering that's the hand you're dealt on Cape Cod, the realistic answer is that it is always going to be a problem," Burgess said during an interview in Chatham.

Arguments over culling seals or killing sharks are nonstarters because the Marine Mammal Protection Act protects seals and is unlikely to be significantly altered. Federal and state laws prohibit the capture and landing of great white sharks.

It is the general consensus of the scientific community as well as the majority of the national public that restoring a natural balance to marine life in the ocean after centuries of human impacts is a good thing, Burgess said. But for sharks and seals on the Cape, exactly what those restored populations will look like in size and distribution is hard to predict, he said.

"The reality is that the natural number of seals and white sharks, who primarily feed on seals, hasn't been seen in our generation, by our fathers, our grandfathers, our great-grandfathers," Burgess said.

There's scant record of either in historical writings or oral history of the region. But white sharks are noted in what records exist as being present in many of the areas they are being seen now.

Burgess flipped the pleas by some to take back our beaches and restore our rights to safe recreation by questioning primacy of ownership.

"They ask, 'Why are we seeing all these seals on my beaches in 2018?' " he said. "But in 1818, those were the seals' beaches."

≡ The focus has been on the population explosion of seals and sharks, but Burgess said human population growth also needs to be factored in. The number of people in Barnstable County has risen sharply from 26,670 in 1920 to more than 222,000 in 2000. Tourism triples that figure on any given summer day at the exact time that current research has shown that the greatest numbers of great white sharks are hunting seals closer to shore. Global warming, with record air and water temperatures in recent years, makes it even more attractive to be in the water.

But Burgess said he doesn't think the choice will come down to either kill the sharks and seals or don't go in the water.

"Killing all sharks is all wrong on one side, but the idea that these things are all warm puppy dogs that need to be hugged is off kilter on the other side," he said.

Burgess has served as a consultant for countries or areas where there has been an increase of shark attacks on humans. Before his recent trip to the Cape, Burgess said, he thought he would focus his attention on areas where seals haul out to dry and socialize as potential hot spots for great whites. But after speaking to state Division of Marine Fisheries lead shark researcher Gregory Skomal, Burgess realized the Cape's great whites do a lot of patrolling along the beaches between hot spots and frequently encounter humans there, he said. He believes further research by Skomal, who is finishing up a five-year population study, may uncover patterns or environmental conditions that lower the probability of shark attacks on humans.

"Armed with [Skomal's] research, we should have a better idea of where and when sharks are most likely to be found and then it is incumbent upon us to open and close beaches accordingly," he said.

The surfing community poses the biggest challenge, Burgess said, because the areas that remain open may not be the best waves and some may choose enjoyment over risk avoidance.

"It's their choice," he said. "I don't begrudge them that. Just don't blame the sharks."

The Cape has a lot of work to do to keep people safe from attacks and to better respond to a bite, Burgess said.

"What are we going to do to make sure that if we have a bite, we're not going to have a death?" he said.

☰ Reducing the time it takes to get to a trauma center is critical, Burgess said. Worldwide, about one in 10 shark bite victims die. In the United States, that's down to 1 in 50 thanks to advanced medical care. The Cape, he noted, has had three attacks and one fatality.

"When it comes to trauma, you have a 'golden hour' to keep a trauma victim alive," he said. "If it's going to take 40 minutes to get from the beach to the parking lot ... you don't have a lot of room for error."

Improving communications on beaches with little-to-no cellphone coverage and getting shark attack victims off the beach quickly are crucial to survival, he said. Even so, the closest hospital emergency room is Cape Cod Hospital, a half-hour or more from most beaches. Level I trauma centers are in Boston, and Burgess said communities need to consider establishing a trauma facility closer to the beaches, or a seasonal unit that is open during the summer.

"The community needs to understand that its government is acting to reduce the level of risk and increase your level of survival," he said. "But any hopes that there is going to be no ... shark attacks is foolish."

— *Follow Doug Fraser on Twitter: @dougfraserct.*

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