

TerranearPMC Safety Share

Week of August 19, 2013 – Sharks: Reality versus Myth

With beady eyes, huge jaws and pearly white teeth the size and sharpness of samurai swords (OK, a little exaggeration!), and having close encounters plastered across the news, it's no wonder the very thought of running into a shark would send shivers down our spine. Ever since *JAWS* hit the silver screen, we have been fed to believe that shark attacks are not an anomaly, but rather business as usual at the beach.

If you're planning a summer getaway to a coastal resort, however, rest assured that fatal shark attacks are, according to statistics, incredibly rare when factored against the number of snorkelers, swimmers, surfers and others who venture into the ocean each year.

According to the [International Shark Attack File](#), a division of the Florida Museum of Natural History, there were 118 alleged incidents of shark-human interactions worldwide in 2012. Upon review, ISAF found 80 of the incidents to be valid and confirmed cases of "unprovoked attacks," which it defines as "incidents where an attack on a live human by a shark occurs in its natural habitat without human provocation of the shark."

The 2012 figure was up slightly from 2011 when there were 78 unprovoked attacks, but on par with the 2010 total of 82. ISAF said the number of unprovoked shark attacks has grown steadily since 1900, despite an overall decline in shark populations as a result of overfishing and habitat loss.

Regardless of the statistics, sharks are scary. In the water they're faster than us, can appear from what seems like out of nowhere in an instant, and pack a pretty solid bite. It's easy to get nervous when you're in the dark ocean and unsure of whom is swimming by with a toothy grin. But sharks aren't the animals you should be most afraid of. If the mere thought of sharks sends chills down your spine, consider the damage that a swarm of ants could inflict. And even cows have been known to be deadly. Here are some animals that are much more likely to cause your demise.

- Mosquitoes: 655,000 people killed each year, primarily in Africa, through the little buggers spreading malaria left and right.
- Hippos: 2,900 people are killed by these moody mammals annually in Africa. That roly-poly exterior is just to lure you in.
- Deer: 130 people killed across the U.S. by deer, almost exclusively because drivers hit the deer with their cars. That saying "a deer in the headlights" came about for a reason.
- Bees: 53 people die each year in the U.S. because of an allergic reaction from being stung.
- Dogs: 30-35 people are killed each year in the U.S. Fido isn't always your best friend.
- Ants: 20-50 people are killed each year in Africa from ants. They may be small but dozens, hundreds, even thousands of stinging ants can really add up.
- Jellyfish: 20-40 people per year die in the Philippines alone from the anaphylaxis caused by the stings.

- Cows: 22 people are killed in the U.S. every year from these seemingly docile creatures. They're fun to pet, but getting kicked in the head by one ... not as fun.
- Horses: 20 people die each year thanks to our equine friends.
- Spiders 6.5 people die in the U.S. every year from spider bites.
- Rattlesnakes 5.5 people die from rattlesnake bites each year in the U.S., which isn't a whole lot considering how common they are in popular hiking and camping areas.

OK! ..many people have a fear of rattlesnakes, jellyfish and spiders as well as sharks!

Now, compare these fatal statistics with the less than 10 annual fatality in the U.S. and fewer than six worldwide are killed by sharks. From 2006 to 2010, there were just three fatalities from shark attacks in the U.S.

Granted if you're swimming with bull sharks, you're more likely to die by a shark attack at that moment than a cow. But most of us aren't in the water with sharks as often as we find ourselves next to a cow on a visit to a farm or at a petting zoo. And we certainly are around bees and ants a whole lot more often than sharks. But if you find yourself swimming in the ocean, or even some rivers, you're probably nearer to sharks than you realize. With millions upon millions of beach-goers and surfers taking to the water every day, only a small handful are ever bitten or killed by sharks. So if you find yourself harboring feelings of fear or even hatred of sharks, you might want to take a step back and gain a little perspective. They aren't nearly as deadly as you might think.

Maybe the fear of a shark attack is similar to the fear of flying as in both cases, we feel we are in a situation where we have no control and therefore, we are left helpless. We also feel that there or no offender bends in the sky, while there are no small scratches or bruises when one is bitten by a shark. So while experts may argue about the extremely low incident frequency, it's the severity that really scares us.

Almost all shark experts consider that the danger presented by sharks has been exaggerated. The creator of the *Jaws* phenomenon, Peter Benchley, attempted to dispel the myth of sharks being man-eating monsters in the years after his novel (he wrote an extensive article in National Geographic on the subject before his death).

When considering the number of people who go to beaches, a person's chance of getting attacked by a shark in the United States is 1 in 11.5 million, and a person's chance of getting killed by a shark is less than 1 in 264.1 million. In the United States, the annual number of people who drown is 3,306, whereas the annual number of shark fatalities is less than 1. Alone in New York people are bitten 10 times more each year by other people than worldwide by sharks.

“I ask people why they have deer heads on their walls. They always say because it's such a beautiful animal. There you go. I think my mother is attractive, but I have photographs of her.”

Ellen DeGeneres