

Letter to Jim Douglas, President WACRA, from Dr Scoresby A. Shepherd

29 November 2011

Dear Jim,

I would like to support strongly your proposal to seek legislation to prohibit shark fishing off metropolitan beaches and jetties. I have been engaged for >40 years in marine research and have discussed this issue with shark researchers, who have worked extensively on shark behaviour and movement in this State. Hence the opinion below reflects our considered view.

Current understanding from the above research and my own experience can be summarised as follows:

1. Sharks come into shallow waters when in pursuit of prey. Hence I have observed them off the Torrens Outlet when dead freshwater fish were washed out to sea in floods. I have also observed them come into the shallows in pursuit of a school of mullet or pilchards, although this is a comparatively rare event.
2. A major attractant for sharks is the smell of fish blood, or merely a dead fish in the water. In the metropolitan area shark fishing often occurs from shore and from jetties, especially at night.

At times up to 4 shark fishers, each throwing fish berley into the water, may be seen off one jetty. Typically, the fisher will tie a dead fish to a sinker and buoy, such that the fish is held 1-2 m above the bottom, and cast it off the jetty. Attached to the dead fish is the appropriate heavy fishing gear needed to catch a shark. Such gear is much stronger than that needed for ordinary fishing. The presence of such lures on the bottom, cast from the jetty, will both bring sharks into the area, and keep them in the area for much longer than is usual. It will also bring inshore white sharks, which are usually further offshore. The evidence for this is twofold.

1. Some years ago, when in the then Fisheries Dept, I carried out experiments in the Gulf in which we tied a dead fish to a sinker and buoy as above. We then waited on the bottom in SCUBA gear to see how long it would be before a shark appeared. It was only a matter of minutes, when about six bronze whaler sharks appeared and circled the fish, until one took it. The experiment was repeated and the results were the same. We again repeated the experiment, this time using a plastic imitation fish, and this time no sharks were attracted. We concluded that the fish odour was the principal attractant. Other more recent evidence indicates that sharks can be attracted from as far away as 5 km downstream.
2. Other experiments have been carried out by shark researchers to see the effect of eco-tourist shark cages and associated bait carcasses on white shark behaviour. The evidence is very clear that any bait attractant will keep them in the area for much longer than is usual, and they repeatedly return to the same area. I understand regulatory changes are in hand to impose limits on this industry. Normally, a shark may come into an area, but it then moves off again quickly, unless retained by food or bait. Hence, the evidence is mounting that shark fishing off jetties lures sharks, including white sharks, into shallow waters and keeps them there longer. This increases the element of risk for swimmers, who may unwittingly be swimming within metres of a shark lure.

In the interest of public safety there is a strong argument that shark fishing should be prohibited off jetties, and also the use of fish berley, a major attractant, all of which is currently permitted. Two approaches to the problem are possible:

1. simply prohibit shark-fishing, and use of fish berley, but allowing other kinds of berley; and/or
2. prohibit the use of the heavy wire traces that are needed for shark fishing, permitting only monofilament lines. Enforcement may not be simple, but is not insuperable. A prohibition, and occasional visits by fisheries inspectors, will ensure compliance, as it does with all other fishing regulations.

Sincerely,

Dr Scoresby A. Shepherd AO Senior Research Fellow