



The shift from fun to fear with Cape Cod's sharks

By Doug Fraser

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One year after bodyboarder Arthur Medici died in a shark attack off a Wellfleet beach, the focus in Outer Cape waters is on safety and coexistence

WELLFLEET — For those who love Cape Cod as an ocean playground, the world shifted a year ago today when a 26-year-old bodyboarder from Revere was fatally attacked by a great white shark at Newcomb Hollow Beach. Arthur Medici's death was the first in Massachusetts in over 72 years and the only shark fatality in the U.S. in 2018. It devastated his family and shocked the local surfing community.

It also pushed towns, the Cape Cod National Seashore and the state to begin making much-needed upgrades to communications networks and take steps toward providing better rescue and trauma response.

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For the average beachgoer, Medici's death brought into sharp focus the real danger everyone faces when entering the ocean and kick-started grass-roots initiatives to improve safety.

"I think as a community we responded as well as we could have," Cape Cod National Seashore Superintendent Brian Carlstrom said. "It was a tragic event, and a near fatality a month earlier, and we've done a lot to improve our messaging to enhance awareness, to enhance our responsive capabilities where we could."

The reality, Carlstrom said, is that the ocean is a wild environment that includes sharks and seals.

"Any time you go in the water, you are assuming a risk. We want to make sure people

understand that,” he said.

The beachgoing public was very aware of the fatality and cooperative this summer, beach officials said.

The statistic that most impressed Wellfleet lifeguard Ethan Craven this summer was not the number of times they had to close beaches to swimming for shark sightings, but that lifeguards had no water rescues. “I usually do two or three (a summer),” he said.

“I can’t think of one (water rescue),” Orleans Natural Resources Director Nathan Sears said.

Water rescues happen when people venture into deep water and either get caught in a current or are not confident swimmers. Outer Cape lifeguards met with state Division of Marine Fisheries shark scientist Gregory Skomal at the start of the summer. They decided this year they would keep beachgoers on sandbars in water no deeper than their waist — no more venturing out to catch the biggest waves or swimming across the deep troughs between sandbars where sharks are more likely to be found.

“Based on the presence of sharks ... we’re five steps ahead of them before they encounter deep water or a rip,” Sears said. He doesn’t even allow his staff to train in deep-water rescues any more.

“I don’t let my guards train or do anything I don’t let general beachgoers do,” Sears said.

“There’s no skill set for avoiding white sharks.”

Warning signs ‘new reality’

Beaches on the Outer Cape had new signs with graphic warnings identifying the risky months (summer, early fall), 911 call boxes, trauma kits, even a sign asking people to sign up for trauma response training.

Cape Cod fatal shark attack: One year later



“Everyone who visits has to walk by that signage. It’s a little unnerving for visitors, but when they get down to the water, the fact that lifeguards assure them they will do everything they can to make sure you won’t be in high-risk areas with sharks eases their angst,” Sears said. “It’s the new reality.”

But it’s an uneasy coexistence between those seeking sun and surf and the large predators that now patrol our beaches and live by ambushing prey. While the scales worldwide are tipped in favor of humans, who kill millions of sharks each year compared with the handful of people killed by sharks, the reality at Cape beaches is that coexistence is a one-way street.

The fear of being eaten is primal and foreign to us. We don’t have the weapons, the claws, the teeth, or the strength to best a great white in the water. For those who survive an attack, the encounter is traumatic and remains embedded deep in their psyche.

On July 30, 2012, Colorado businessman Chris Myers and his son J.J. were attempting to swim to a distant sandbar off Ballston Beach in Truro. Myers was attacked in deep water hundreds of yards from shore. He felt the sharp pain of teeth sinking into both legs and pulling him down. His right leg came free, but his left remained caught in a viselike grip and he saved himself by kicking hard at the shark's nose.

But after it released him, the shark surfaced and eerily passed between the two men, about 9 feet of its back and the big dorsal fin sliding by. A month later, Myers returned to Truro to thank the paramedics who treated him that day. He was driving on Route 6 when he had the distinct impression that a shark was headed for him and had to fight the urge to turn off the road.

"It was just a surfboard (on top of a car) with the fin sticking up," Myers said. "I could see how ridiculous it was, just a swerve that took over my body, a fear coded into my body."

William Lytton, a professor in the neurology lab at State University of New York Health Science Center in Brooklyn, said he was less than 10 feet from shore but in water over his head and swimming far from the protected beach in Truro on Aug. 15, 2018, when he was attacked by a great white. The shark bit down hard enough to gouge his leg bones with its teeth. The shark's head came out of the water and its tail whipped back and forth attempting to saw Lytton's leg off.

Lytton fought for his life, punching it repeatedly until it let go. He suffered extensive damage to his left leg and to his hand. He's out of rehab now and was back swimming on the Cape this past summer, but in Vineyard Sound, not the Outer Cape.

Lytton is a computationalist, a neurological scientist who investigates the mechanical underpinnings of the brain's thought processes. Statistically, the odds of being attacked may be exceedingly slim, but the brain is wired differently and amplifies a known threat.

"Once you know about something, it increases (your perception of) its likelihood of happening," Lytton said. "That's the way the human brain works."

Even in a swimming pool, Myers said he has to tell himself there are no sharks there. The memories of the attack returned when he heard about Medici's death last year.

"It gave me a tremendous jolt. I felt this kind of sick to my stomach thinking about him, the

pain, the loss to his family,” Myers said.

Myers, who is married now and lives in Vienna, Austria, said he caught a lot of grief for swimming too far from shore, but he realized shark attacks occur in both shallow and deep water.

“My own feeling is there’s just a lot of sharks in the area, and it’s too bad because there’s nothing like swimming the Outer Beach, or bodysurfing it,” he said in an interview this week. “I’m personally terrified when I’m in the water,” he said. “There doesn’t seem to be any way to be safe.”

‘Your head is always on a swivel’

“People getting bit didn’t faze people as much as Arthur’s death,” said Eric Gustafson, who has owned Fun Seekers surf school for 25 years.

Gustafson caught a waist-high wave on his paddleboard at Newcomb Hollow on Tuesday and deftly pivoted, first right, then left, following the unbroken face as it pushed toward shore.

It was the end of a surfing lesson, and Ben Mahanna, a 24-year-old chemical safety specialist from Medford, and Lisbeth Furke, a 35-year-old real estate agent from New York, paddled and caught their final wave of the session.

Gustafson said his business was down 25 percent last year and 50 percent this year. He went from five employees to 1½.

“You can’t miss it,” Furke said of the warning sign with the very real photo of a great white shark that greets beachgoers at nearly every beach along the Outer Cape. “The sign makes me worry a lot.”

They unzipped their wetsuits next to what looked like a black braided bullwhip, curled around a blue-and-white painted buoy jammed into the tidal flats at Newcomb Hollow Beach. The “whip” emits an electric current that, in theory, irritates the electrosensitive organs on the white shark’s snout that can detect the electromagnetic pulses of your heart beating in your chest, or the nerves telling your muscles to flex as you paddle.

Gustafson anchors the whip, known as an Ocean Guardian Freedom7, in the surf area he uses

for lessons in the hope it will offer some measure of protection.

“The teaching thing is very difficult because you know what joy it brings, but your head is always on a swivel,” he said.

“Fun” is right in the name of the Cape’s oldest surf school, and for Gustafson there is no greater joy than sharing his lifelong love of the ocean. While he can use weather forecasts to keep his pupils out of stormy seas, he can’t predict when there may be a shark nearby, and booking a lesson now involves a reality check.

“Do you know what’s going on here and are you comfortable with it?” Gustafson said he asks the mother or father booking a vacation lesson for their child, or themselves. “You need to make a decision based on what I’m about to tell you.”

- Shark sightings and interactions in 2019 along the Cape Cod coast:



Shark ping via tag |



Shark sighting |

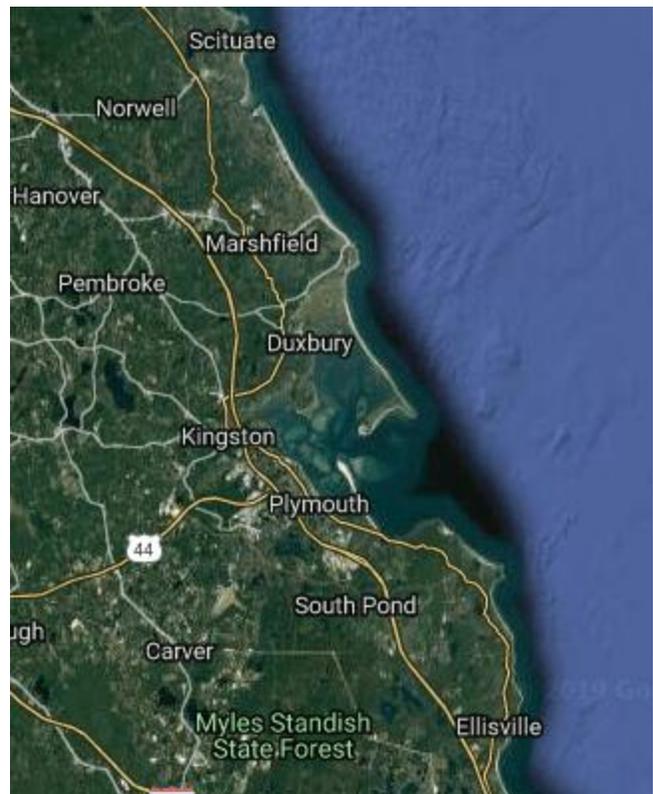


Shark attacks seal |



Shark tagged

Cape Cod Shark Watch Map 2019 ☆



Map data ©2019 Imagery ©2019

Sources: Atlantic White Shark Conservancy and state researchers | Map: Gregory Bryant/Cape Cod Times

The answers are generally divided into two camps, he's found.

“One says, ‘Oh, we can’t do that,’ and the other says, ‘Life’s a risk and we’re OK with it,’” Gustafson said. But there’s a third camp, the ones who want him to tell them it will be OK, that they or their children will be safe.

Those are the tough ones, because he can’t do that.

Surfing community reacts

Although two of the Cape’s four shark attacks have been on swimmers, the surfers, paddleboarders, divers and others who remain in the water for hours at a time are statistically at the greatest risk. The Cape surfing community’s reaction to Medici’s death varied widely.

“There’s so many different, personal perspectives, which was a reflection of how people feel,” surfer Drew Taylor said. “Some people moved away, some people are pretty much carrying on like it didn’t happen, and others have really changed their behavior when it comes to going in.”

There have been no shark attacks on humans yet this year, although sharks are still in the area in significant numbers through October.

On Tuesday, David “Buzz” Ellsworth contemplated going in at Newcomb Hollow. He has surfed in other areas where white sharks are relatively common, such as the South Island of New Zealand, Tasmania in Australia, and in California. Ellsworth lives in Denver, but owns a home in Osterville that he rents out in the summer. He keeps tabs on shark sightings and beach closures, even when he’s in Denver, through the Atlantic White Shark Conservancy’s Sharktivity app.

Ellsworth was on the Cape last September when he heard the news about Medici’s death. He had surfed Newcomb just a week before it happened.

“I certainly wasn’t anticipating it ... I was saddened and shocked to hear about it,” he said. It drove home the danger and changed how and when he surfs.

“Like right now. It’s chest-high on the sets and I’m not charging it because there’s nobody out right now,” he said.

With over 200 sharks now tagged and over 400 identified, has Cape Cod joined other better-known great white hot spots such as Australia and South Africa?

“I think the stats show it. The activity between scientists and lifeguards, the fact there’s an app, and signs. There’s a reason for that,” Ellsworth said.

All consideration of a technological solution, such as drones or shark-detecting sonar buoys, officially halted with the onset of summer. But Heather Doyle pushed back against what she saw as a largely passive response that acknowledged risk but did little to mitigate it.

“People are not ready to stay out (of the water),” said Doyle, who founded the Cape Cod Ocean Community, a grass-roots organization with over 630 members that sprang up in response to Medici’s death. The organization’s goal is to fill the information gap on shark detection and deterrence technologies and methodologies in use in the US and around the world.

Although the group failed this spring to convince a town or the National Seashore to host a free shark-detecting sonar buoy to test that technology, it was able to purchase and loan out wristband deterrents and dozens of air band radios to those who wanted to receive shark reports from a network of volunteer pilots whose work or pleasure takes them along the Cape shoreline. Gustafson borrowed his Freedom7 from Doyle’s organization.

Doyle’s group also held an information session early in the summer that resembled a trade fair for vendors selling everything from stripes and eyes for the bottom of your board to Ocean Guardian’s electromagnetic technology.

“There is a hunger for people to talk collectively, tear down the wall and make information easier to get,” Doyle said.

Towns are aware that visitors are skittish after last year’s tragedy.

“A lot of our group is worried about going in the water, but we heard there were going to be lifeguards here,” said Nancy Schindler, packing up her car Wednesday in the parking lot of Newcomb Hollow Beach. They’ve been coming to the Cape for 25 years, she said, usually in September, and were at a nearby beach last year the day Medici died.

“At least five people a day thank me for being here,” said Ellie Hartman, 20, one of four Wellfleet lifeguards who remained on duty after Labor Day. Wellfleet decided there was a need, and lifeguards are stationed at Newcomb Hollow Beach from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day, and at Maguire’s Landing Beach on weekends. They also run hourly patrols of the town’s Atlantic beaches in an all-terrain vehicle.

“We get so many questions. How many sharks did you see today? Is it safe to go in?” Hartman said.

Craven said he didn’t notice any drop in the number of people going in the water during the summer season.

“It doesn’t keep me out of the water,” he said. “It just makes me more cautious.”

Sears said he hadn’t yet computed Orleans beach attendance numbers, but felt there was no noticeable drop.

Wellfleet showed a drop-off in resident beach stickers of just 63 compared with 2018, but a decrease of 364 from the 4,108 sold annually on average over the past 10 years. Single-week beach stickers purchased by renters also dropped by 265 this year compared with 2018, and by 621 from the 10-year average.

At 83, Barbara Herzog has been surfing in Wellfleet since she first started coming for summer vacations over 40 years ago. She has two children, ages 40 and 59, who also love the water. This was the first summer the family didn’t vacation on the Cape.

“We went to Little Compton (in Rhode Island) and surfed,” she said. “It was very sad. We all really missed the Cape.”

The Cape towns had not done enough to assuage her fears, she said, and she felt it was essentially the same as before Medici’s death. Drone pilots, for instance, have been reporting that great white sharks are relatively easy to find, but towns have yet to use drones, or even test their effectiveness.

“There are some things they could do like balloons (specialized weather balloons that carry HD cameras), (spotter) pilots,” Herzog said. “It sends a message that we’re too frightened of liability to help you.”

Carlstrom said his agency and the towns are holding off on using technologies until after the release of a report by the Woods Hole Group expected at the end of September that evaluates shark detection, deterrence and exclusion technologies, along with biological strategies such as culling seals and/or sharks.

“We’re always willing to learn more to make our beaches as safe as possible,” Carlstrom said.

Sears said he quietly tapped into an unlikely resource that helped them this summer. A number of boats, typically charter fishing vessels, are conducting great white shark tours. Some of them pooled resources to hire a spotter pilot to help locate sharks.

“I reached out to them through their websites and I have a pretty strong network of communication established with those boats,” Sears said. “I would say 25 percent of the time I was getting called for the presence of sharks it was from those boats.”

Furke has made her peace with it. The summer that Cape shark sightings started making the news, she had rented a condo for a vacation, but ended up canceling the trip and going home. But once it was clear that sharks were a permanent fixture here, she returned.

“I wish it was different, but it is what it is,” she said.

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