

Shark-human interactions that result in shark bites are rare events.

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Recently two teenagers were bitten by sharks off Oak Island in North Carolina, US. It came to our knowledge that North Carolina officials were considering indiscriminate shark culls similar to the one that inspired global condemnation in Western Australia last year (see <http://goo.gl/BWW2IU>) in response to these unusual events. This type of incident is incredibly rare. Multiple bites on the same day in the same location have, to our knowledge, only been documented one time before this, in Egypt in 2010. We believe it is important to keep in mind the relative risk of these types of incidents when deciding on the appropriate policy response, both in terms of marine conservation and in terms of the best use of public funds.

Millions of people go swimming off beaches where sharks are present every year; however shark bites have an extremely low rate of occurrence. Because of that, efforts to kill every shark that approaches the shoreline will not appreciably reduce risk to swimmers. Initiating a shark cull will thus have little impact on the risk of future shark incidents, but it would result in substantial environmental impacts. Sharks play a critical role in the coastal environment that so many depend on for employment, food and recreation. Many species of sharks are already overfished, and 24% of all species of sharks, skates and rays are listed as Threatened with extinction by the IUCN Red List. Accordingly unnecessary culls will further deplete numbers and could jeopardize the health of fragile coastal ecosystems.

There are several other ways to reduce the risk of sharks biting swimmers. David Shiffman, a PhD candidate and shark expert, has proposed the following seven methods: conducting aerial patrols, establishing shark spotters, temporary or permanent closing of beaches, designating swimming areas, moving sharks out of the area and releasing them away from the shore, increasing scientific studies and, last but not least, educating the public about sharks (see <http://goo.gl/jwBXLr>). We encourage authorities to consider these actions instead of an indiscriminate shark cull.

Finally, we would like to note that we have not used the term "shark attack", as it is inflammatory and inaccurate. These unfortunate events are shark bites – the only means for a shark to confirm the identity of prey items. Following such initial bites, sharks typically leave the accidentally bitten human alone. We thus believe it is important to use the term responsibly. Please see this link for more information: <http://goo.gl/OuGnMr>.