Imming For Chumps At Tampa Shark Conference

By SEAN PAIGE

safe to go back in the water. assure residents and tourists that it's to reduce the jitters generated by last year's "Summer of the Shark" and re-Wildlife Conservation Commission sponsors, the National Marine Fisher-Tampa this week is intended by its ies Service and the Florida Fish and A conference on shark attacks in

of attacks? Gulf of Mexico, with rising numbers numbers in the Atlantic Ocean and tecting sharks, and increasing their ernment regulations aimed at procircumstantial evidence linking govthe event itself an effort to paper over about a real and growing danger, and to lull the public into complacency government-sponsored spin, meant But what if such reassurances are

tacks that has occurred since then. ers: \$23,000) was any kind of preview, so federally funded — cost to taxpay-Washington's National Press Club (al the rapid increase in U.S. shark atearly 1990s, are in no way related to government protection, and that to extinction and in desperate need of happen, that sharks are being fished "Summer of the Shark" didn't really vince invited journalists that the manipulate statistics in order to conpresenters at the Tampa event will those protections, in place since the If a recent press conference at

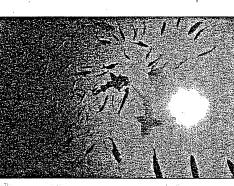
feeding sharks.

once-common practice of divers ida waters have put an end to the

esty and balance to the conference shark protection efforts has been inence or wisdom of state and federal cause no one who questions the scistate actions may have something to to all these assertions and plausible the whole story. agenda, I'll do it here so Floridians get vited to participate, and so bring hondo with increased attacks. But bereasons to suggest that federal and There are solid counterarguments

In one of many distortions, presenters will dismiss last year's "Summer of the Shark" as nothing worse than the year preceding it — an urb legend manufactured by a "media eeding frenzy." an urban

year for attacks, with U.S. attack totals betore last year (2000) was a record What they won't say is that the year



sharks chasing exploding baitfish

It's my concern that protected

being culled out by commercial and

Concerns about shark attacks in Flor-Associated Press file photo 1002)

consecutive record years. coastal sharks in the Atlantic and Gulf spiked upward, culminating in two traction, numbers of attacks have al fishers. As those efforts have gained quotas of commercial and recreationby imposing deep cuts in the catch ing'' allegedly depleted stocks of large federal government began "rebuildularly experienced before the early .990s, when the state of Florida and

one in the annals of U.S. shark attacks cord, also set in 2000. was only one shy of the previous re-And the number of Florida attacks, 37, record set only a year earlier, of 54. and fully deserved its moniker. The 55 'unprovoked" U.S. attacks broke the Setting back-to-back records for In fact, last year was a remarkable

corded in all of the 1990s combined shark attacks is itself ominous, in my any occurrence as unpredictable as the severity of attacks also was exopinion. Not just the numbers, but U.S. fatalities were more than were retraordinary. Last year's three known

off the beaches of Virginia and North sick, called the back-to-back deaths One noted shark expert, Jack Mu-

> dumping chum off the beaches, they So unless reporters were out in boats, schooling of sharks off Florida's West can hardly be held responsible for the their heads, groping for explanations. Coast had other experts scratching lact that those beaches became buffet

were being instituted. advocates are being dishonest when statistical rarity. But to see why shark sound like many, and they remain a federal and state shark protections averaged about 11 attacks annually in they argue that it was nothing out of (where most U.S. encounters occur) he following. The state of Florida shark protection measures, consider he ordinary and in no way related to he first four years of the 1990s, when

the year before. state. There were 37 last year and 38 creating sanctuaries in areas closest 27 a year, and for the last two years counters are most likely to occur (and 40 attacks per year. In 1992, the year prowl) the dangerous bull shark is known to to shore, where human-shark enlimits in state waters — effectively Florida banned commercial shark have nearly quadrupled, approaching in Florida have more than doubled, īshing and slashed recreational shark — there were 12 attacks in the ö

where federal and state shark protections are in effect. Attacks in Califorclined through the 1990s, contradictoccurred in the Atlantic and Gulf, growth in the number of U.S. attacks beaches. ulation growth and more use of the are merely a function of human poping arguments that increased attacks tections exist, remained steady or denia and Hawaii, where no such pro-(and all three of last year's fatalities) Moreover, the most dramatic

gan to rebound (assuming they were sharks and responding to pressure seriously depleted in the first place) beaches when shark populations bethe time these shark protections were the government's main concerns at from wildlife advocacy groups were instituted. What might occur at the

Carolina "unprecedented." And the

ast year's 55 U.S. attacks may not

Since then, annual attack averages

Saving supposedly endangered

for predators. quantity of baitfish in near-shore wanet ban that has greatly increased the when Florida in 1995 instituted a gilloblivious to possible consequences never seems to have crossed anyone's ers, creating a bigger potential draw

And state officials seemed similarly

encė."

cussed at its Tampa shark "confer-

Why would government regulators

thing the government wants dis-

But those concerns are the last

tacks since the mid-1990s. the considerable increase in shark atin the past — may be contributing to recreational fisherman, as they were populations — neither of which are

sharks and running a public relations

campaign downplaying the possible ing down public anxieties about be spending your tax dollars dampen

suing to force even deeper cuts in the styled "experts" who support (and are financially dependent on) those regucrisis concerning sharks. catch of commercial shark fishers) groups (some of which are currently three interlinked interest groups: government agencies engaged in shark by creating an exaggerated sense of that have egged the whole process on latory agencies; and "Save the Ocean protections; shark scientists and selfthreaten to undermine the mission of consequences of their actions? ic concerns about shark attacks an instinct for self-preservation. Pub Like sharks, they are motivated by

groups in action, be sure to attend this your time by going to the beach instead ... well, just be watchful out But if you decide to make better use of week's shark conference in Tampa. If you want to see these interest

grant.org/faculty-students/Sharks/ conference information: www.flsea (cei.org). E-mail: spaige@cei.org. For market policy group in Washington Competitive Enterprise Institute, a free Sean Paige is an adjunct fellow at the