

Chumming For Chumps At Tampa Shark Conference

By SEAN PAIGE

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

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

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

There are solid counterarguments to all these assertions and plausible reasons to suggest that federal and state actions may have something to do with increased attacks. But because no one who questions the science or wisdom of state and federal shark protection efforts has been invited to participate, and so dining honesty and balance to the conference agenda, I'll do it here so Floridians get the whole story.

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

What they won't say is that the year before last year (2000) was a record year for attacks, with U.S. attack totals many times higher than anything reg-



Associated Press file photo (2001) **Concerns about shark attacks in Florida waters have put an end to the once-common practice of divers feeding sharks.**

ularly experienced before the early 1990s, when the state of Florida and federal government began "rebuilding" allegedly depleted stocks of large coastal sharks in the Atlantic and Gulf by imposing deep cuts in the catch quotas of commercial and recreational fishers. As those efforts have gained traction, numbers of attacks have spiked upward, culminating in two consecutive record years.

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

Setting back-to-back records for any occurrence as unpredictable as shark attacks is self-evident, in my opinion. Not just the numbers, but the severity of attacks also was extraordinary. Last year's three known U.S. fatalities were more than were recorded in all of the 1990s combined.

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

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

Last year's 55 U.S. attacks may not sound like many, and they remain a statistical rarity. But to see why shark advocates are being dishonest when they argue that it was nothing out of the ordinary and in no way related to shark protection measures, consider the following: The state of Florida (where most U.S. encounters occur) averaged about 11 attacks annually in the first four years of the 1990s, when federal and state shark protections were being instituted.

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

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

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

never seems to have crossed anyone's mind.

And state officials seemed similarly oblivious to possible consequences when Florida in 1995 instituted a gillnet ban that has greatly increased the quantity of baitfish in near-shore waters, creating a bigger potential draw for predators.

It's my concern that protected sharks chasing exploding baitfish populations — neither of which are being culled out by commercial and recreational fishermen, as they were in the past — may be contributing to the considerable increase in shark attacks since the mid-1990s.

But those concerns are the last thing the government wants discussed at its Tampa shark "conference."

Why would government regulators be spending your tax dollars dampening down public anxieties about sharks and running a public relations campaign downplaying the possible consequences of their actions?

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

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

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