



AMERICANS HOOKED ON SHARK MYTHS

National Survey Shows People Know Little About Sharks

Baltimore, Md. (May 14, 2003)— People don't know the facts when it comes to sharks, according to a national survey sponsored by the National Aquarium in Baltimore.

The survey shows that most Americans grossly overestimate the risks sharks pose to humans; that people are unaware that there are 400 diverse shark species; and they mistakenly believe that there are too many sharks in the sea.

"People fear what they don't know," said Nancy Hotchkiss, director of education and exhibit developer for Shark Quest, a new exploration of sharks at the Aquarium. "Sharks have been around for 400 million years and play a critical role in ocean health. We want people to discover that sharks are amazing animals that deserve our respect and need our protection."

The survey, conducted by Opinion Research Corporation, Inc., shows that of 1,010 adult respondents:

- **More than 80 percent said shark populations are "just right" or "too high."** In fact, more than 11,400 sharks are killed every hour, every day, and some species are on the brink of extinction due to overfishing and bycatch.
- **More than 80 percent don't know how many shark species exist.** Although there are more than 400 species, more than half the respondents thought there were fewer than 150 shark species.
- **Some 30 percent mistakenly believe that all sharks are large, gray, sleek and have large teeth.** In fact, there is no typical shark. More than half of all adult sharks are smaller than a first-grader; sharks vary widely in size, shape, diet, biology and habitat.
- **More than 70 percent believe that sharks are dangerous.** The reality is, shark attacks are extremely rare, and when they do occur, it's usually a case of mistaken identity. People are more likely to be injured by a hamster or killed by lightning than by a shark.

Surprisingly, **nearly 60 percent of respondents said they thought sharks need protection.**

"We attribute this sympathetic response to the fact that people are generally aware of declining ocean health," said Hotchkiss. "Intuitively they know that all aquatic creatures are at some risk."

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To dispel the myths on sharks, the Aquarium launched Shark Quest on March 15. In this new interactive experience, people can see shark pups developing in egg sacks, talk to underwater SCUBA divers, stand near 7' x 8' megalodon jaws, find shark tooth fossils and meet interesting characters. They also have the opportunity to touch a live shark and explore the depths of the Open Ocean exhibit where sharks surround them.

“Initial feedback from visitors to Shark Quest is that their perceptions are already changing,” said Hotchkiss. “Visitors are not associating sharks with scary adjectives as much as they used to.”

Shark Quest immerses visitors in the world of sharks and features the Aquarium's 35 sharks representing nine species. In a first for the Aquarium, the exhibit includes actors who play the roles of a paleontologist, a waterman, a surfer and a tourist. The exhibit also includes new video displays of sharks in the wild, shark births, shark exploitation and other compelling footage.

Shark Quest runs through 2003. For more information, call 410-576-3800 or visit www.aqua.org. The National Aquarium in Baltimore, a non-profit organization and world-class aquatic institute, is Maryland's leading attraction, hosting more than 1.5 million visitors per year. Dedicated to education and conservation, it serves the environment, students, visitors and communities through a wide variety of programs.

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Note to editors: For Memorial Day beach travel stories, Aquarium spokespeople can provide tips on avoiding shark attacks and put shark attacks into perspective for your readers. B-roll, digital images and slides of sharks and Shark Quest are available. The survey was conducted in December 2002 and has a margin of error of two percent.