

## For Two Weeks Last Year A Great White's Visit Was No Movie

By Nelson Sigelman

Thirty years ago a movie about the visit of a great white shark to a small New England coastal community made people afraid to enter their backyard pools. Celluloid images of a ravenous fish snacking on the inhabitants of Amity did not do much to help the public image of sharks, either.

Despite the fact that the average person was far more likely to be killed and entirely devoured by a deranged next-door neighbor, the shark became a public enemy. Newspapers across the country carried photos of fishermen posing like members of a proud old west posse with a dead white shark, jaws pried open for sinister effect.

But as the Jaws franchise reached depths of movie-making absurdity in sequels, marine scientists raised concerns as the number of sharks of all kinds declined under the pressure of overfishing. The general public, which had always considered sharks the mortal enemies of Flipper, the human-loving dolphin in the popular television series, slowly began to understand that sharks also had a place in the environment.

Fast-forward almost 30 years after the making of the movie Jaws to the small, elite coastal community of Naushon Island just across Vineyard Sound from Martha's Vineyard. On Sept. 21, 2004 a 14-foot, 1,700-pound female great white shark was discovered swimming lazily around in a deep, narrow inlet leading north from Lackey's Bay at the east end of Naushon.

The shark became the focus not of armed fishermen, but of curious people anxious, sometimes to the point of foolhardiness, to get close to an animal that is both an object of fascination and deep fear. Over a two-week span, the shark attracted worldwide attention as state and federal marine officials worked to protect the fish and coax it to leave the cove.

For Greg Skomal, a state Division of Marine Fisheries marine biologist based on Martha's Vineyard and the state's shark expert, the unexpected appearance of a large female white shark, *carcharodon carcharias*, in waters just across Vineyard Sound was a rare opportunity. He was able to observe, at almost arm's-length range and for a protracted period of time, a great white literally in his own backyard.

Greg first conclusively identified the shark as a great white after it was discovered in the wide, shallow, rocky bay, which opens to Vineyard Sound, and is formed by Nonameset, Veckatimist, Monohansett, and Naushon Islands in the Elizabeth Islands chain. And he was in the forefront of the efforts to free the shark while learning as much as he could about its behavior in such a unique situation.

Up until that day in September, the last time Greg had seen a great white close up was during a dive off South Australia in 1995 when he saw six. But that still did not surpass having one in Vineyard waters.

"As a marine biologist pursuing his childhood dreams, this is probably the single most exciting event in my life," said Greg when interviewed by The Times last year. "Not only from the perspective of a scientist and what I can accomplish here and contribute to biology, but in terms of fulfilling my dream of being able to accomplish, experience, and see all of this."



PHOTO COURTESY DIVISION OF MARINE FISHERIES

Greg Skomal uses his cell phone to reassure his boss, DMF director Paul Diodati, that everything is going swimmingly as the great white circles the cove.

News of the great white's foray into shallow waters near Martha's Vineyard was reported as far away as Australia, a country very familiar with the large predator and its many toothy cousins.

Closer to home, the Cape Cod Times, Boston Globe, Boston Herald and numerous television stations provided press coverage that ranged from the scientific to sensational.

The Boston Herald carried a photo of the shark cruising in the shallow waters on the bottom of the front page accompanied by the headline "Man-Eater Menacing Woods Hole."

fondness for humans; it is just that sometimes people get in the way.

"The biggest misconception is that white sharks consume people on a regular basis," said Greg. "It just so happens that every now and then a human floating at the surface resembles one of their usual food items. White sharks have small brains and do not really differentiate."

He said the method white sharks use to tell if something is eatable is to bite the object. If it seems okay they eat it.

In fact, white sharks much prefer seals, whale carcasses, and other marine mammals and animals with high fat content. In terms of a menu, humans are the unpalatable equivalent of a piece of burnt, stringy chicken.

Greg said the notion that a great white such as the one depicted in Jaws would want to get at a food morsel, played in the movie by Robert Shaw, so badly that it would sink a boat runs contrary to shark behavior and biology. "There is no emotion in these animals, it is all instinct," said Greg.

On the positive side, generally speaking a great white does not take a second bite of a human victim. On the downside, the first bite is often so extreme that it proves lethal because the victim bleeds to death. For example, the bite radius of the shark at Naushon was probably between 18 and 24 inches.

While not abundant along the Atlantic seaboard, great whites range from the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of

Maine, with the greatest concentration found off Cape Hatteras. The presence of a great white in New England waters was not unusual, except for the fact that the shark was found in such shallow water. Greg said the Naushon shark had to cross a depth of approximately three feet to enter the estuary where depths range to 20 feet. It then had to be persuaded to cross that shallow barrier again.

Scientists learned last year just how important water depth is and how quickly the great white appeared to react and adapt when faced with obstructions meant to change its behavior.

The behavior of some of the many people attracted to Naushon was harder to understand. People traveled by kayak and dinghy to get close to the shark. One man stood within a few feet of the shoreline with his three children and dog.

Greg could not help but ponder what might have happened if someone had thrown a stick in the water. Although the shark displayed no outward signs of aggression, he made the point that this was a 1700-pound very unpredictable animal.

Looking back over the entire episode and the movie that forever changed the way some people think about a night ocean swim, Greg said a lot has changed since he was a teenager and saw a movie that would help nurture his own professional fascination with sharks.

"One thing that jumps out at me is the way the public's attitudes towards sharks have changed in general from the time Jaws was made. After Jaws came out the general feeling was that the only good shark was a dead shark and that sharks eat people. Fishermen in general were killing high numbers, not even to eat them, but to discard them because they were considered to be the nemesis of the oceans.

"In the movie Jaws, when that monster shark showed up the town's people wanted to kill it. But 30 years later we have a big shark that shows up in a quaint New England private village and people wanted to save it. I thought that was pretty cool."

Nelson Sigelman is The Times' news editor and fishing columnist.



The dorsal fin slices the surface calm.

The inside story, "Shark Bait The Curious," carried a photo showing a pair of kayakers on the water trying for a closer look.

The entire saga ended on Monday, Oct. 4. Herded by nets and nudged along with help from the spray of water pumps, the great white shark finally crossed a stretch of shallow water biologists thought was a natural barrier the shark was unwilling to cross. The shark was last seen heading due east in Vineyard Sound.

During this weekend's Jaws Fest, Greg will describe last year's experience and what he has learned during a professional career spend studying sharks. In a recent conversation Greg described his presentation as an effort to dispel some myths and educate people.

"The movie Jaws is entertaining, it draws our attention, it scares us and draws on our emotions and I think it was really a cool movie," said Greg, "but I plan to talk about what is real about white sharks."

He said the sharks do not exhibit the type of single-minded aggression depicted in the movie. Nor do they have a



An up-close view of a 14-foot great white.



An aerial view of the estuary where the great white remained for almost two weeks. (The shade in the corner of the photo is not the shark but the helicopter that carried the photographer).