

Marine expert Avi Baranes, what would explain the rash of shark attacks at Red Sea beaches in recent days?

Dr. Avi Baranes is a scientist at the Interuniversity Institute for Marine Sciences and an expert on sharks.

By Asaf Shtull-Trauring

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Sharks have been attacking tourists on Red Sea beaches in Sinai over the last week. In the most recent incident, a 70-year-old German woman was killed off Sharm el-Sheikh, just a few days after three Russian tourists and one from Ukraine were seriously injured in two separate attacks. Dr. Avi Baranes, a scientist at the Interuniversity Institute for Marine Sciences, and an expert on sharks, just two weeks ago presented a report to the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities that sums up 30 years of research on Red Sea sharks. In an interview with Haaretz, he sought to make clear that "sharks are actually quite nice."

Dr. Baranes, the shark attacks we've seen in Sinai recently are considered rare, but three such attacks have been reported in rapid succession. Why is this happening?

It's true that a violent confrontation between swimmers and sharks is an exceptional event. I think there have only been two cases in all our history: with a British English soldier in 1946 and an attack in Eilat in 1974. Unfortunately the film "Jaws" gave sharks a bad name, and unjustifiably so. Many more people are eaten by dogs than by sharks, and this is because sharks are uniquely attached to their own particular food. So, when there are incidents like this, we have to look for a cause. Sharks attack people when they invade their territory, and then their reaction is aggressive, as it is when they are unable to obtain their natural food. In 1974 in Eilat, a Mako shark attacked a German tourist. The shark was caught the next day and it turned out that it had a problem with its spine and could not swim fast. This was a shark that usually fed on tuna, and it simply could not obtain its regular food. In Sinai I know of cases where sharks simply bit the legs of Bedouin fishermen who were standing on reefs. This is the response to an invasion by humans into the shark's living space, and this can also happen when divers enter their territory.

Shark territory reaches right up to the beaches in Sinai?

The Red Sea is one of a kind. It is narrow and deep and that means that whereas in the Mediterranean, sharks are found only in the middle of the sea, in the Red Sea they can arrive close to the shore. If you go out 50 meters in Eilat, you are already at a depth of 100 meters, so big sharks can get pretty close to the shore. They also approach areas where food is accessible, and by this I mean port areas. Unfortunately, we use the sea as a big garbage dump. Three years ago we caught a tiger shark on the northern shore of Eilat and in the laboratory, I found a smaller shark, about 1.8 meters in length, in its stomach, as well as a sheep's head, two chickens, a nylon bag and two unopened jars of mayonnaise.

What about Mediterranean sharks?

The Mediterranean is very shallow and so when sharks approach the beach, they are usually females in spawning season who have entered shallow waters to spawn their young. Shallow water is not amenable for large male sharks to swim in.

Can you compare the different species of sharks in the Mediterranean and the Red Sea?

In the Red Sea, the temperature does not go below a certain point, so that the corals produce reefs, a kind of refuge for all kinds of marine life. I would say that 80 percent of the fish in the Red Sea live on reefs - a kind of highly accessible food pantry - and so the sharks patrol along reefs. We have 26 species of shark in the Red Sea, include thing Leviathan shark, the largest of all, which pays visits in April and May. It is 12 meters long, but not dangerous. Of the 26 species, there are maybe two that are capable of attacking people. There's no need to make a big deal about this.

The Mediterranean has more species than the Red Sea, and that's where the great white shark [the star of "Jaws"] can be found, rather than in the Red Sea. To date, there has been no damage to the shark population in our areas, but those in the Mediterranean are under threat because of a reduction in the number of fish. If something is not done to give the fish a chance to recover their numbers, the big predators will be in danger.

Today we have, in partnership with the UN, established an organization to protect sharks from extinction. All Asians love [to eat] shark's fin. They make soup with it, which the Chinese claim strengthens virility. It's true there are lots of Chinese, but that doesn't necessarily make this claim true. Thousands of tuna are used to catch sharks each year; the hunters take the fins and throw the rest back into the sea, and the damage is enormous. Luckily in Israel the shark is a protected animal.

What do you recommend to reduce and prevent shark attacks like the ones we've been witness to recently?

Protect the sea. Don't turn it into a garbage dump, and prevent pollution. A lot of sewage flows into the sea, and the minute you damage a system, a lot of species are hurt and disappear. It's like a Russian nesting doll: The big swallow the small. If you damage a coral that serves as a refuge for small fish, not only will they disappear, but and whoever feeds upon them will also disappear, and so on down the line, until the big sharks can't find food.

I suggest we not be afraid of sharks. We must respect them, and we can look at them in the water. I also suggest that we refrain from trying to attack them because they will respond and they have the strength and the means to defend themselves. Just enjoy the view. There is nothing more beautiful than a shark swimming in the sea.