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FISH BAY REFLECTIONS

Shark Talk

Last month I said I wanted to start a ‘Darwin project’ in Fish Bay. It would basically be an inventory and informal study of the plants and wildlife in the neighborhood, drawing on the knowledge and observations of local residents and experts.

Given the fact that there are more insect species here than anything else, I thought I might start with an inventory of all the different kinds of bugs in the house. But most people were more interested in talking about the sharks.

Lots of people have shark stories they like to tell, but I am not aware of any scientific study of the sharks in Fish Bay. Fortunately there are some experts on the island who I hope will help make some sense out of our informal and anecdotal information, and help guide some field studies.

The February meeting of the Audubon Society featured a presentation by Carrie Stengel, who is a self-described ‘shark geek’ working with the National Park Service. Before that she worked at Coral World, and she showed us pictures of herself wearing a chain mail outfit feeding the sharks in the Coral World tank.

Although Carrie pointed out that we humans are much more dangerous to sharks than vice versa, so much so that some kinds of sharks are becoming endangered, she acknowledged that what people most want to hear about is shark attacks. The thought of being in the water with a shark arouses strong feelings – of fear and excitement – in most people.

There is no doubt that most of us are much more alert, more aware of our surroundings, if we think there might be sharks around. Personally, I am not very prone to risky behavior, and even though I’ve heard there are sharks all around St. John, lots of different kinds, the danger doesn’t seem very great most of the time and I still like to go in the water. Sometimes I get nervous, though, thinking about the sharks-eye view of the swimmers in the movie ‘Jaws’.

Carrie said that most shark attacks are mistakes. From below a surfer lying on a board paddling could look like a turtle. Swimmers might be mistaken for seals, or even wounded fish, depending on how much thrashing around they are doing. Boys are statistically more likely to get bitten, because they tend to swim out farther and splash around more, calling more attention to themselves. They are less likely to be wearing flashy jewelry, though, which also apparently attracts sharks – because it could be mistaken for reflective fish scales. I have heard that before, about barracudas too, but I

usually don't think about it until I am in the water and see the light sparkle off my diamond ring, like a beacon for hungry predators.

According to Carrie, sharks actually have good eye sight – during the day. Since they feed at dusk, if you're in the water then you are more likely to be mistaken for food. We were told that most swimmers never see the shark coming, though there are some sharks that prefer the 'bump and bite' approach over the sneak attack. Carrie also said that if you do see sharks in the water, it's wise not to go in. I guess that's why most people stay out of Fish Bay. The last time I looked off the dock I saw a two and a half foot baby black tip.

After her talk, I asked Carrie what she thought was happening when lots of large sharks seemed to be congregating in the bay at the end of the summer. Although mother sharks come in to shallow areas to have their pups, she said they tend to come in alone so the other sharks won't eat the pups. When there's a crowd, it's more likely they're interested in mating, and she said to definitely stay away from them then because they don't like to be disturbed. Quite naturally. The big sharks don't stay around long though. The mothers leave their pups to fend for themselves in the shallows. The young ones might stay for a year or two in the bay before heading for deeper water, and bigger meals.

Besides the nurse sharks, black tips and reef sharks I have seen in Fish Bay, I have heard of several bull shark sightings from people diving or snorkeling out in the deeper areas of the bay. Other shark reports have come from people looking down on the bay from their houses. It is hard to identify the species from that distance, however, though the large dark shapes moving through the water are surely some type of shark.

I am planning to collect tales of Fish Bay shark sightings, and other wildlife stories, so if you have any to share please send them to me at gkarlsson@worldnet.att.net, or call me at (340) 693-7679.