



Bob's World

By Bob Davis, photos by Han Jie

Encounters with Sharks . . .

December 08 and January were interesting months for sharks. We saw tragic losses, at least one of which was thought to have been to a white pointer off WA and we saw unusual numbers of big hammerheads off beaches along the NSW coast, possibly due to later than usual movement of whales heading south, followed by the sharks.

These events brought back a few memories about my own encounters with sharks, several of which remain etched as 'cold sweat' memories.

The scariest moment I ever had with a shark was some years ago, when I lived in Canberra and liked to trail my centre console 16 footer down to Narooma, to fish the island for kingies. I always planned such trips around tide cycles that suited a day out, optimised for running the Bar.

On this particular day, it was good weather with kind seas, but the kingies went off the bite early, so my mate and I decided to try a bit of slow-troll live baiting in a berley trail, hoping for a tuna, off the back side of the island. We expected there'd be the usual nuisance of seals taking the live baits, but to our surprise we had no such problem.

After an hour or so we learned why. The boat suddenly began to rattle about. Suspecting I may have snagged the outboard leg on a stray rope or similar, I kicked the motor out of gear and went aft. I looked over the transom to investigate.

There I found a very large shark trying to pull my berley pod – made from the spin dryer out of an old washing machine - off the back of the boat! It was big, and may have

been a white pointer, but I confess I didn't wait there too long, hanging over the transom, being watched by a very big eye, to undertake a precise identity check...!

My entire plumbing system tightened quite dramatically, you know?

Whether or not it was the smartest thing to do, I leapt to the console, yelled for my mate to hang on, and shoved the throttle forward, to escape the damned thing! I guess we were lucky that it didn't have a full-on bite hold on the berley pod.

That wasn't the only time that I felt real fear, under the eye of a big shark.

Some years later, fishing outside the reef at Coral Bay south of Northwest Cape, a baitfish shoal erupted not far from us, ahead of a line of bow waves from some big surface-ploughing trevally. It was the sort of sight to excite any angler.

Alas they were not much interested in the choice of lures we offered them, and we went back to trying for a few coral trout or norwest snapper for a feed. Then somebody noticed that we were not alone. It was the biggest hammerhead shark I have ever seen, cruising close to us, rolling his head and lifting his head wing out to eyeball us in the boat. He kept circling the boat closely, looking at us. Crikey!

We were in a Star 20, and this thing was almost as big as the boat, so it was a big animal. Perhaps it was simply curious, but that eye had my skin crawling, as if the thing was eyeing us as potential lunch. With as much dignity as possible, I started the twin outboards and departed that place.

Some people do very silly things with sharks. I recall a long weekend when we camped at Greenwell Point,

and early one morning we joined a small queue of boats that was trolling lures through a school of salmon just off the surf line on the long beach just to the north, and we were getting a few. I'm one of those people who happen to enjoy eating very fresh salmon, hence my interest. A small halfcab was about 50 metres behind us. Seems they'd lost a couple of salmon to a small shark and somebody on board thought it might be a good idea to try to get the shark.

It was never quite clear whether they actually hooked it on a heavy line close to the boat, or just took a wild shot with the gaff when it followed another salmon to the boat, but either way they got a gaff into it, and together the two guys immediately hauled it aboard. No, they didn't pause to subdue it with a club before bringing it over the side. Talk about commotion!

You get a fair idea that a boat is in trouble when you see one bloke up on the halfcab roof, another on the narrow side deck clinging to the screen frame, with the boat moving erratically, just outside the surf line!

They had to be towed out of the danger area, and back to the ramp. Had there not been other boats close by they would have gone into the surf, for sure.

It was only a 'small' shark, yes, but a metre long mako shark hot-gaffed and hauled into the small cockpit of a 4.5 metre halfcab is a sure recipe for drama. The shark was seriously irritated, and an irritated mako of any size is very dangerous! With the power of its tail and its teeth, it completely wrecked the cockpit area. Both of the side pockets were ripped off, two fold-down aluminium chair struts were destroyed, and the engine and battery cables were shredded.

The extent of physical damage

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astonished me. That boat owner learned a big and costly lesson, that day.

When I was younger, I learned a lesson about being alert at boat ramps.

My father and I had been fishing off Dunsborough, in the south west of WA, and had returned to the aging ramp near what Dunsborough old timers call Fish Rock. It was one of those bouncy days when, for that particular ramp, somebody has to be in the water to steady the boat while somebody else works the winch. I was the one in the water.

Dad had barely started to winch the boat up, when a sharp wave caught the back of the boat and lifted and swung it. The outboard leg was only about half way raised. As the boat swung, the outboard leg caught the side of a bigish shark, and swung the shark around to the side of the ramp where there was a rock pool.

When the wave receded, the shark was trapped there, thrashing about. There were loud yells of 'Shark!' I'd already seen it, as it was swung by the motor leg, and in nano seconds I was out of there, I can tell you.

Nearby, there was a diver who'd come back in just before us. He sprinted for his rig, and came back with an alloy hand spear, the type with a rubber sling, but armed with a

bang-head.

Back in those days, a lot of spear fishermen carried these devices, loaded with a shotgun cartridge, able to be screwed quickly onto the head of a spear, specifically for killing sharks.

Nowadays I think they'd be very rare – perhaps even illegal. Without hesitation, he waded straight into the rock pool with the shark and killed it. I have to say that there was no way known I'd have ever waded into that pool with that shark! All present agreed that it was a bronze whaler.

How big was it? It took multiple grown men to drag the thing out of the pool.

For some strange reason, the diver chose to have a bunch of guys help him lift it up onto the roof of his small car – which my old memory thinks was something like a Morris 1100, but maybe not - and the weight of it immediately collapsed the dome, permanently denting it I reckon.

The diver drove off, to parade his kill. For length, its head and tail overhung the roof of the car. This was not a small shark. That animal must have been sniffing about at the back of the boat, not very far from my legs! Ugh!

The more worrying factor was that that boat ramp was only a hundred metres or so from the front beach of old Dunsborough, where children were swimming.

When the diver was taken by a big shark off a WA beach recently, his son, who was diving with him at the

time, subsequently said that his father would not have wanted the shark to be hunted and killed.

His father loved fishing and diving and understood that the ocean is the domain of the shark, we go there knowing that and at our own risk, and that loss of humans to sharks is accidental.

Those are both enlightening and sobering sentiments. We all might have liked this man, I think, and we note his sad loss.

Sharks sit at the top of the ocean food chain. Their evolution to current forms was completed thousands of years ago, and they are perfect hunting machines.

They fascinate me and, at times, they have scared me. And yet along with so many others, I continue to go fishing and swimming.

My wife and I even bought new wetsuits recently, as she is very keen on developing her skills at snorkelling.

When it comes to sharks, we know that we don't live in the ocean, hence sharks do not see us as their usual prey, and they do not actively hunt us – so most of us adopt a familiar perspective: don't be afraid, be aware.

Being alert during the warmer months is wise counsel.

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