

MEET THE SHARKS PROGRAMME

Face to face with sharks

■ Denise Lloyd

Most of us fear the idea of encountering a shark and finding ourselves between a set of these ocean dwellers' sharp teeth and the movie jaws ensured that most of us think twice before venturing out into the ocean.

In actual fact, we should be much more fearful of an array of everyday encounters in our own homes! According to statistics there is on average three things in and around our houses that cause far more deaths and injuries than sharks...

The innocent looking toaster causes approximately 900 deaths and lightning about 10 000 deaths per year and who would ever have thought that a toilet seat is responsible for 43 000 injuries annually?!

If we compare the 2009 international statistics of 60 attacks and only five fatalities (deaths) worldwide, it looks as if we have definitely put the wrong tag around the neck of a shark. That is exactly what Enrico Gennari, *Oceans* Director and his team of researchers say. They claim that we need sharks far more than they need us and it is of the utmost importance that we change our perceptions and stop to conserve instead of killing.

"Sharks are in trouble of being extinct and if that happens, we as humans will suffer far more than we can even comprehend," he told a group of scholars from the Great Brak Secondary School during the first information session for high school pupils in Mossel Bay.

Gennari and his team are in the process of educating primary- and high school pupils as well as youth organisations regarding sharks and the very important role they play in the ecosystem. A special programme has been put together and the Mossel Bay Municipality has granted R10 000 in fund assistance, they have been commencing on this

"Meet the Sharks" Education Project.

The programme consists of a fascinating presentation about shark species and the ocean; a shark dissection; exclusive viewing of a professional documentary based on white shark research in Mossel Bay; a behind the scenes tour of the aquarium and

the opportunity to swim with the local small (not so dangerous), sharks. Unlike any other marine educational programme the participants are given the chance to go out to sea aboard a local Seal Island tour vessel where the learner can view "up close and personal," the seals; dolphins; whales

and occasionally white sharks. An experience like that would usually cost R1 200 per learner but with the donation made by the municipality, learners are given the opportunity to get this once in a lifetime experience free of charge.

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The pupils are given a lesson in the benefits of sharks and the role they play in the bigger universe. In the wild the lion goes for the sick and weak animals and in doing so, they ensure that only the fittest survive.

"The sharks also act as 'doctors' to keep the fish population healthy. If they do not do the cleaning-up work, we might find ourselves stuck with a stinky, rotten and unhealthy ocean," he told the pupils.

"But how many sharks do we kill a year?" he asked. A number of answers were given but nothing in the region of the 100 million that are killed annually.

A number of human activities also threaten their survival. Long lines and trawling nets are used and a large number of sharks get caught up in these devices. Often they are thrown back into the water, but then they are already dead.

Shark fin soup is a delicacy in Asia that can easily cost up to R500 a bowl and it is almost like a status symbol to have some of it. Often the fin is cut off while the shark is still alive and then the shark is thrown back into the ocean and although it doesn't feel any pain and there is no blood, the shark cannot survive, because it cannot swim or breathe. There are also the trophy hunters that only want to show off and discard the rest of the shark after they have cut the head off.

"What can you as young people do to turn this situation around?" he asked the pupils.

"You are the future lawyers; teachers; politicians and other decision-makers. If you understand now what it is all about, you can in future make a difference," he said. Some of the advice and tips that he gave the pupils are that they should say "no" to any shark product. Often, if you look at the package, you will see that shark products have been used.

"Toothpaste with collagen comes from

sharks and a lot of gel, wax and lipsticks all contain shark ingredients," he said.

He added that you can get one of the little guides supplied by the WWF that gives you an idea of which fish you can eat without feeling guilty.

He also suggested that the pupils get involved in volunteer work as beach cleaners and that they learn as much as they can about the environment.

"Without knowledge you are very poor and you can't really do anything," he said and urged the pupils to spread the word about the importance of sharks to the ocean and its environment.

He also drew the attention to the fact that not all sharks are dangerous.

There is only about five of the 400 species that pose any danger to man.

After the information session, the Grade 11 and 12 pupils were taken to the Shark Lab to "meet" the sharks and to experience a shark being dissected in order to gain information on what a shark is made up of.



A group of pupils from Great Brak Secondary School watch with fascination as Rob Lewis, field specialist of New Zealand parliamentarily dissects the shark and informs them about their behaviour; instincts and special features.



Some of the role players in the "Meet the Sharks Education" programme are Enrico Gennari (Oceans Director), Yolande van Aswegen (Youth Coordinator: Mossel Bay Municipality), teacher, Peter Smith and Katie Cummings (USA International Intern and Director: Development).



"Look ma - no teeth!" Although it was only a small shark that was dissected, the pupils were very wary about putting their fingers in it's mouth. Here the pupils get the opportunity to see what a shark looks like from its stomach side.