

The Great White Shark (Carcharodon Carcharias): Is It Nearing Extinction?

"They come up with the energy of an express train and they hurl themselves right out of the water".

It's late in the afternoon. The water is dark and an especially large amount of plankton reduces the underwater visibility to a minimum. Some time ago it occurred to me that with such poor underwater visibility I could probably forget about the object of my visit, to take underwater photos of the Great White Shark.

Like many previous occasions, I am sitting at the boat's stern between the two 80 HP outboard engines, the camera levelled. Through the viewfinder I am watching the neoprene seal-dummy which our little boat is pulling behind it on a fishing line. I support my arms on my knees, to ease my tense muscles. In the past I have often had to remain in this position from the early afternoon until sunset, through heavy swell, rain and storms, just to take the picture of my dreams - a breaching white shark, leaping for prey. Until now, all my efforts have been in vain.

Dyer Island is located six nautical miles off the coast of Gansbaai (170 kilometres south-east of Cape Town), on the opposite side of which is the small island known as Geyser Rock which is home to an estimated 60,000 South African Fur Seals (*Arctocephalus pusillus*). As long as the seals stay ashore, they are safe. But when they leave for the open sea to catch fish, they have to negotiate a dangerous shark-infested channel between the islands called "shark alley" which, not surprisingly, is reputed to be the best place in the world to watch white sharks.

The sharks patrol mercilessly here, and there is no way to escape them. The seals run the same gauntlet when they return to the island, and those swimming alone, and very young seals swimming close to the surface, face the greatest threat.

This is the scenario we have attempted to reconstruct in this case, with the hope of luring a white shark to reveal itself to the camera. For hours I have been keeping my lens pointing at Koekie, the artificial neoprene seal bobbing along behind the boat. Suddenly, a huge and very heavy body is rocketing out of the water like a torpedo. It has "Koekie" in its mouth. Everything happens in a split second.

It's a precise attack with a fatally perfect timing.

Every single square centimetre of this exquisite creature is vibrating energy. An unforgettable sight. The incredible dynamic of the leap is captured in the picture.

The great white shark (*Carcharodon carcharias*) has been around for at least 3.5 million years, but now it is acutely threatened by extinction. It remains to be seen whether the species is already "genetically extinct" - in other words there are so few individuals left that the survivors are genetically very similar to one another and are less likely to be able to withstand other insults that nature can throw at them. The number of sharks, of all kinds, caught every year is estimated at 100 million. Half of it is 'bycatch', which is thrown away. With this overfishing the shark population is irreparably damaged. Due to the decimation in their numbers, which has lasted for decades, and their low reproduction rate, the prospects for the great white shark do not look good.

I'd like to focus my efforts on helping the sharks because they are really under threat now. The increase in wealth of the Chinese people is of course great for them but conversely it's not good news for the sharks because shark's fin soup is a Chinese delicacy that is becoming more affordable as those people become richer. So there is a thriving and growing export trade of shark's fins to the Far East. The worst thing is that the sharks are caught, their fins removed and they are thrown back into the sea alive to only die a terrible death. No animal should be subjected to that. So through my work I'm trying to draw attention to this to stop it. Otherwise in a few years some species could be extinct.

About the Author

Klaus Jost is a nature and underwater photographer. You can see Klaus's photos and learn more about his work at his website

<http://www.jostimages.com> . You can see pictures of the Great White Shark here:

<http://www.jostimages.com/galerie/sharks/breaching-great-white-shark.html>

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