

Great White Sharks Don't Want To Eat Us

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Complicated relationships entwined to produce shark attacks

In the waning days of July, Julie Dimperio Holowach was swimming off the coast of Harspswell, Maine, with her daughter. What was a fun day in the surf and sun turned tragic when she was bitten by a great white shark and died as a result of her injuries.

The ensuing talk in the press and by New England beachgoers centered upon the rising seal population and its role in attracting sharks to local waters. Culling was discussed, and one headline read, [More Seals Means Learning To Live With Sharks In New England](#), painting a picture that it's the rotund sea mammal's fault we've entered "Jaws" 2.0.

But the relationship between sharks, seals, and humans is more nuanced and complex.

Of sharks, seals, and humans, a John Steinbeck quote from "Of Mice and Men" seems appropriate: "Maybe ever'body in the whole damn world is scared of each other."

OF SEALS

In Inuit folklore, seals were created from the fingers of Sedna, the goddess of sea animals. In one version of the legend, Sedna angers her father by rejecting her suitors and marrying a dog. Enraged, he casts her over the side of his kayak and cuts off her fingers as she attempts to clamber back into it. Her fingers became the first seals, and Sedna becomes ruler of all creatures of the deep.

Other groups have their own legends about pinnipeds that slide through the water like fish, but can also maneuver their way on land.

And in New England, two breeds of pinnipeds — gray seals and harbor seals — have a deep relationship with the region's land and sea.



The return of gray seals to New England waters, after they were hunted to dangerously low numbers, is often blamed when a shark attack happens. (istock)



White sharks, famously known as great white, were scaring seafarers and beachgoers long before "Jaws" was released. They and other shark species have been depicted as monsters and man-eaters for centuries.

historic times up through early 1900s," said **Kimberly Murray**, a research biologist and seal research coordinator at National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Northeast Fisheries Science Center. "In fact, there was so many of them that there was a bounty for them in Maine and Massachusetts in the late 1800s, early 1900s. We don't know exactly how many there were; I think ... that it's estimated something like 75,000 to 135,000 seals of both species were taken for the bounty, so there were a lot."

While the presence of seals in this area has long roots, so does the history of humans hunting them, with seal meat even served at the first Thanksgiving.

"Seals and sea lions have historically been hunted," said **Monica DeAngelis**, a marine mammal biologist at the Naval Undersea Warfare Center in Newport, R.I. "That was sort of the beginning of the relationship. Native Americans hunted them for subsistence and then European settlers, the early ones, used them for oil and meat, and for their pelt."

Seal numbers declined steadily over the years, with people even picking them off for sport with guns in Narragansett Bay. The hunting and decimation of their numbers continued until the 1970s, when the Marine Mammal Protection Act was enacted in 1972 and the Endangered Species Act was enacted in 1973, both by the Nixon administration.

"They were really hunted down to low levels," Murray said. "And there were a couple factors that allowed them to come back and recover. One of those was laws that were enacted in the state of Massachusetts in the '60s and then the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act in 1972. These protective laws pretty much banned hunting."

Today, gray and harbor seal populations continue to reclaim the territory they fled along the coast of New England, where they haul out to breed, molt, and have their pups.

The population of gray seals, specifically, comes from a larger colony up near Nova Scotia in Canada, and have been steadily repopulating a territory that they had to leave to survive.

"There's estimated to be a quarter-million of gray seals in Canada, and they move around a lot," Murray said. "We know that the animals that have come down to the U.S. starting in the late '80s, early '90s, are coming from that source population. They are able to return to a territory they used to occupy, and that's why I think people get really surprised because they didn't know they were here before." **(to page 25)**