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But not everyone is happy about the return of the seals. Besides competing with fishermen for various fish stocks, the newly healthy seal population has sparked the idea that with more seals comes more of their scariest predators: sharks.

OF SHARKS

Humans have long held a fascination with the wonders — and horrors — of the sea, and sharks are no exception.

“There are some cultures that revere the shark and worship the shark and there are others that are frightened of it,” said **Gregory Skomal**, a senior scientist for the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries.

An illustration from the [16th-century epic poem](#), “History and True Novel of the Duke of Lyon de Bourges,” depicts a shark as a scaly, fanged monster with red eyes terrorizing the crusader Olivier de Bourges, who swings his axe at the beast as it devours his helmet.



A large white shark photographed by Greg Skomal off the Massachusetts coast.

Locally, more than a few historical records describe sharks as “monsters” and “man-eaters,” and a few vigilantes have even killed sharks as revenge for attacks. And the shark that lingers in man’s memory as the most fearsome of them all? The white shark,

colloquially known as the great white.

“Here in New England and as far north as Newfoundland, white sharks are very well documented historically over the last several hundred years or so,” Skomal said.

But it was one summer, the summer of ’75, when the biggest and baddest of white sharks came to town. Its name was Jaws.

“Whenever you hear about a shark attack ... you immediately think of ‘Jaws,’” said Marc Lapadula, a senior lecturer in film studies at Yale University. “People saw that film and they were terrified. People left their seats. I was there, I was 15 in 1975.”

Lapadula lectures on films that changed America, and he noted that “Jaws” scared people so badly, that during that summer people avoided dipping so much as a toe in the briny blue.

“It was so scary to people that I had friends who had summer homes at Bethany beach or Rehoboth beach or Ocean City, and that entire summer they would not go in the water,” he said.

Bradley Wetherbee, an assistant professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Rhode Island, has spent nearly 30 years of his life studying sharks. To him, the perceptions of white sharks, and even the spotlight on this one breed of shark, is overkill.

“There are a lot of people out there who only know one species — great white sharks — and they know one thing about them, which is that they bite people, they kill people,” he said. “If one person sees a white shark up there in the Cape, it’s in the news. People are fascinated with them.”

But there’s much more to sharks than their unfounded reputation as cold-blooded, doll-eyed killers. Indeed, with more than 500 different species of shark known to man, the white shark is just one of many fascinating creatures.

Wetherbee is quick to defend the cartilaginous fish in all its varied forms. One of his focuses is on mako sharks, which don’t have nearly the cult following that white sharks possess.

“Everything about makos is fast,” he said. “Their tail, muscles, everything. They’d swim circles around white sharks.”

But it’s great whites that are almost always at the forefront of the human mind when a shark attack occurs. According to the Florida Museum’s International Shark Attack File, white sharks are part of the “Big Three” when it comes to attacks.

“The white, tiger and bull sharks are the ‘Big Three’ in the shark attack world because they are large species that are capable of inflicting serious injuries to a victim, are commonly found in areas where humans enter the water, and have teeth designed to shear rather than hold,” according to the [project’s website](#).

“When a white shark attacks, it attacks to kill,” Skomal said. “Their strategy during a predation event is to ambush. A seal at the surface is a very formidable predator itself, and in order for a shark to kill a seal, it has to ambush it with speed, stealth, and strength. Power. So, if the shark is making a mistake and it thinks that person is a seal, it’s still going to strike with force, and it does so in a way that creates an amazing amount of traumatic injury.”

But Skomal noted that immediately after attacking a human, the shark usually realizes its mistake.

“Very rarely if ever do they consume the person because they realize, almost immediately, that they made a mistake, that this is not their normal food,” he said.

OF HUMANS

While calls to cull growing seal populations have sprung up as a way to mitigate the few shark attacks that occur each year, for many experts, the dilemma of the interaction between seals, sharks, and humans isn’t so cut and dry.

“White sharks are known predators of seals; that’s what they augment their diet with as they get larger, when they get to be over nine feet in length. They’re built to kill seals and that’s what they do,” Skomal said. “So it makes perfect sense that as the seal population rebounds and they are recolonizing areas, white sharks are going to take notice and begin targeting those animals, and because those animals tend to be piled up close to shore, the chances of [humans] encountering a white shark are a bit higher.”



The sheer number of people who visit beaches annually severely outnumbers the amount of seals and sharks. (istock)

But part of what is happening, and part of the animal equation that is often left undiscussed, is the human element.

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