

ecoRI: SHARKS (from page 25)

Visiting the seashore wasn't always a relaxing leisure activity. Up until the 1880s, the seaside was a wild place where shipwrecks occurred, storms destroyed buildings, pirates lied in wait to attack, and where monsters lurked in the dark waters. It wasn't until the 1860s that the beach became a place known for its curative qualities. Coupled with the Industrial Revolution and the birth of easy and increasingly affordable transportation in the form of automobiles, a jaunt to the seaside became accessible to more people.

That trend continues today.

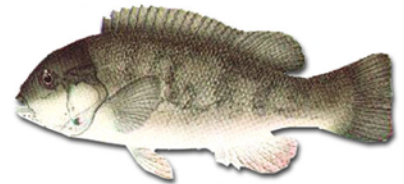
In 2018, nearly 4 million people visited the Cape Cod National Seashore. Compared to the 30,000 to 50,000 seals estimated to be on the Cape in 2017 and the 147 white sharks identified in 2016, humans are the species present in the largest numbers.

And while we fear sharks and blame seals, we've had our own terrible impacts on both species throughout history, from hunting seals to the brink of extinction to the more recent overfishing of sharks.

"It appears that the white shark population, which was quite healthy, was overexploited during the '70s, '80s, and '90s," Skomal said. "During that time, there was a massive increase in shark landings driven by seafood markets and demand for shark fins. Then, in 1997, the U.S. government, followed by states, implemented regulations that protected white sharks: You could no longer target or land white sharks to keep. So ... the population appears to be rebounding back to historical levels. But we don't think it's there just yet."

While humans have attempted to correct the wrongs we've wrought throughout history when it comes to species decimation, the urge to control our environment still sits deep in the marrow of our bones. But like Captain Ahab hunting his white whale, sometimes the desire for control ends with our own demise.

"When you have an ecosystem that's well-balanced, that speaks wonders to the health of the ocean," said DeAngelis, the marine mammal biologist at the Naval Undersea Warfare Center. "And when you have a healthy ocean, you have healthy environment for the rest of us, for humans. I would be very concerned if all of a sudden all of the sharks disappeared, all of the seals disappeared, because that means something is going on with the ocean. It's a delicate balance, and humans have kind of tried to play God."



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